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Resurrecting the Body:
***The Valuation of the Body in Proto-
Orthodox Christianity, 30-300 AD***

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Abstract

For decades, scholars have maintained that the Proto-Orthodox Christians held a dualistic understandings of themselves, insisting that these men and women valued their souls above their corrupting bodies. Although Christians would later adopt this view, the Proto-Orthodox actually conceived of themselves as psychophysical beings, believing their body and soul to be distinct, but equally important, aspects of themselves. This thesis, therefore, argues for the valuation of the body in Proto-Orthodox Christianity through the examination of this group's stories, beliefs, and practices.

The first chapter examines the biblical perception of the body as revealed through Jesus' attitude toward food and the practice of healing. Acting directly against Jewish and Gnostic customs, Jesus fed thousands because they hungered and healed all those in need simply because he cared about people's physical wellbeing. The second chapter focuses on the Proto-Orthodox's conception of birth and rebirth. These men and women celebrated birth as the blessing of all blessings and subsequently rejoiced in the birth of their savior, understanding his incarnation as central to their salvation and proof of God's love for the human body. Indeed, the Proto-Orthodox believed that God loved the body to such an extent that, on Judgment Day, he would allow them to regain both their souls and their earthly bodies to live for ever more. Finally, this thesis concludes by examining the novel Christian phenomena of martyrdom. The Proto-Orthodox believed that the bodies of the martyrs not only witnessed Christ's love, as he alleviated their pain, but also bore witness to his power: after the death of the martyr, the bones themselves were believed to contain the power of God. The examination of the Proto-Orthodox's valuation of their bodies therefore reveals a richer understanding of ancient Christianity.

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Introduction

In the first century AD, a small group of men and women, called “Christians” by others because they followed a man they believed to be the messiah, first arose in the ancient world. The Proto-Orthodox, a sect of these Christians who would eventually become the Catholic Christians, did not, like their Pagan contemporaries, hold a dualistic view of themselves, but instead maintained a psychophysical understanding of selfhood in accordance with their Jewish roots.¹ Yet these men and women exceeded the value even their ancestors placed on their bodies to truly love the bodies they believed God had bestowed upon them. They did not see their physical selves as a corrupting force which needed to be controlled, or even as a tool which could be used to be close to God, but instead as a crucial aspect of their personhood and therefore equal in importance to their souls. Thus, the Proto-Orthodox, following the example of Jesus, not only fed all those who hungered and healed all those in need, but also celebrated both their Savior’s and their own physical births into this world. To live in the flesh on earth was not a punishment but a reward, as people rejoiced in their physical beings. For not only was Christ born once in the flesh, but twice, saving humankind from sin and promising them an afterlife in which they would reside as a full person, both body and soul, forever. Even after Christ departed from this world, he still made his loving presence known through the bodies of martyrs. The Proto-Orthodox believed that bodies of the martyrs both witnessed and bore witness to God’s love and power, asserting that God was present with them during their ordeal and that he instilled their bones with divine power once

¹ I will define psychophysical selfhood as understanding the body and soul to be distinct, but equally important entities of a person.

they had died. Thus, the Proto-Orthodox, through their stories, beliefs, and practices, demonstrated their conviction in the love and value that God, his son, and his followers held for their physical bodies.

The type of Christianity known to the world today did not, however, miraculously emerge fully formed in 1 AD, nor did the first major doctrinal debate occur with Luther in the 16th Century, or even with the Great Schism of 1054. Instead, dozens of different sects from the Artotyrites to the Marcionites arose and competed with one another for power and authority. Out of this confusion and turmoil rose the Proto-Orthodox who would eventually establish themselves as the one true Christian religion. This process, however, was not an easy one. Shortly after Jesus died, the Proto-Orthodox eagerly anticipated the end of the world and thus attempted to live their lives in anticipation of the next life.² As time wore on and the apocalypse still had not occurred, it became clear that charismatic leaders were no longer sufficient to head communities, and consequently rigid hierarchies founded on apostolic succession (a system in which the leaders' authority could be traced back to the apostles themselves) began to form.³ This system clearly distinguished who commanded the voice of authority within the community and whom the practitioners should turn to either when they had questions of their own, or when they were attacked by other Christians with conflicting doctrine. The apostles and their descendants frequently warned their communities against the false prophets and provided them with advice for how to recognize such imposters.⁴ The bishops atop these

² See for example Paul's letters to the Corinthians and the Romans.

³ See for example Clement "First Epistle to the Corinthians" in Early Christian Writings, trans. Maxwell Straniforth. (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 63; Ignatius "Epistle to the Ephesians" in Early Christian Writings, 63, 79; Ignatius "Epistle to the Trallians" in Early Christian Writings, 79.

⁴ Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, warns his community that "...such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." 2 Cor. 11:13-14.

hierarchies, many of whom came to be known as the Apostolic Fathers, also began to establish doctrine in response to external threats and internal turmoil. Frequently, they wrote not only about mundane topics such as food, clothing, and marriage, but also about broader questions such as the significance of Christ's life and death, and what would happen to Christians when they themselves die.

The formation of a canon of texts thus helped the Proto-Orthodox to defend and articulate their theology more clearly, often in the face of vocal opposition. They did not begin to collect texts they considered authoritative, however, until Marcion, whom the Proto-Orthodox would deem heretical, put forth his version in 144 AD.⁵ The Proto-Orthodox quickly reacted and wrote their preliminary canon in the second half of the second century.⁶ While all versions of the orthodox canon contained the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and several letters of Paul, their contents were disputed and reorganized several times, until finally in 368 AD the list known to the Christian world today came to be written down.⁷ The collection of these texts into a single unit helped the Proto-Orthodox to distinguish themselves from other religious groups of the time. Only these documents, they claimed, held the true and correct beliefs about God and Christ. While the theology contained within these texts was by no means concise or systematic, it allowed for the early church to clearly demarcate itself, and for the Church Fathers to work through its theology and practices until they formed a (mostly) cohesive whole.

⁵ For more information of Marcion, see chapter three.

⁶ The "Muratorian Canon", from Evidence of Tradition, ed. Daniel J. Theron. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1980)

⁷ Eusebius, The History of the Church: from Christ to Constantine, trans. G.A. Williamson (London: England, 1989) 89.

One of the groups this authoritative canon helped the Proto-Orthodox to fight against was the Gnostics, a group of dissenting Christians.⁸ Like the Proto-Orthodox, the Gnostics firmly believed that Jesus descended to earth to deliver humankind from sin. Some members of this sect even believed that Christ came in human form and died a human death upon the cross. The similarities, however, end here. While some Gnostics insisted that Christ was actually incarnated, many Gnostics maintained that Christ's flesh was a mirage, that he only *appeared* to take on human shape, when in reality he was nothing more than a soul or light being.⁹ The Proto-Orthodox perceived this belief to be blasphemous, instead asserting that their savior had physically suffered and died for their sins, thus saving humanity as a whole. Yet the Gnostics argued that Christians were saved through secret knowledge. The Gospel of Thomas, a Gnostic collection of the sayings of Jesus written between 60 and 140 AD, states that, "whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death."¹⁰

Because these men and women believed that knowledge alone saved them, they valued the mind and soul over the physical world. Unlike the Proto-Orthodox creation myth in which a loving God fashioned humankind and the universe, the Gnostics believed that evil forces shaped the world and everything in it. Many different versions of this myth exist, yet they all share a common thread. Sophia (meaning *wisdom*), one of

⁸ Before the extraordinary finding of the Nag Hammadi corpus in 1945, scholars in this area were limited to a few Gnostic documents, but mostly to writings by Church Fathers which condemned the Gnostics as heretical. Because of this limitation, it was generally agreed that the Gnostics were not Christian, but Pagan. Even after the publication of the materials in 1975, many scholars continued to argue for the anti-Christian categorization of these texts, since they found what seemed to be exceedingly Platonic teachings on the denial of the physical world and the dualism of the body and soul. Recently, however, the idea that Gnosticism was actually an early form of Christianity has become more widely accepted, based on the numerous beliefs and practices shared with the Proto-Orthodox.

⁹ For example, see "The Apocryphon of John" in The Nag Hammadi Library ed. James M. Robinson. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998)

¹⁰ "Gospel of Thomas" in The Nag Hammadi Library.

the light-beings sprung from God, decided that she wanted to create on her own and without God's consent.¹¹ Instead of producing creatures of light as God had, she gave birth to a monster, Yaldabaoth. Yaldabaoth, like his mother, yearned to create as well; because of his evil nature, however, he could not do so entirely on his own. Instead, he could only fashion matter and flesh and had to trick God into breathing life into the corpses. From this moment on souls became trapped in a body which corrupted their minds and consumed them with lust and desire. Stemming from these creation myths, the Gnostics believed that everything in this world was evil, except the mind which they could free to find God.

Because flesh sought only to corrupt their minds, the Gnostics practiced strict asceticism to control the lustful urges of the body.¹² While this did not involve the bodily mutilations which came to be associated with Christianity in the Middle Ages, it did involve strict discipline. Gnostics engaged in fasting and strict sexual abstinence to curb their flesh's desire for food and sex, both of which ensnared the mind in the physical world. To the Gnostics, the body held absolutely no use, and they envisioned the day when they would die and leave the corrupting world of the flesh behind forever to rise up to heaven, like a beam of the sun.¹³

The Proto-Orthodox not only struggled with other Christian groups of the time, but also with their own Jewish roots. Because Proto-Orthodox Christianity grew out of the Jewish religion it constantly contended with it for unique identity. Early Christians recognized that they could not ignore Judaism completely because Jesus and all of his

¹¹ See for example "Apocryphon of John" in [The Nag Hammadi Library](#). The second chapter of this thesis will discuss the Gnostic creation myths and their consequences in the real world in more depth.

¹² For example, see "Testimony of Truth" in [The Nag Hammadi Library](#)

¹³ "The Treatise on the Resurrection" in [The Nag Hammadi Library](#)

apostles were Jews: they were circumcised, celebrated Passover, and, for the most part, observed the Sabbath. Recalling prophecies from the Old Testament, the Proto-Orthodox sought to validate their religion, setting themselves firmly in the well-established traditions of Judaism which eagerly awaited a prophet, the son of God, who would descend to earth to deliver humankind.¹⁴

Yet precisely because Christians believed these prophecies to be fulfilled in Jesus, they set themselves apart from the Jews who did not believe Jesus to be the son of God. The Proto-Orthodox consequently began to separate themselves further from their Jewish roots and form their own unique identity, teaching that Judaism only provided knowledge of sin, and not how to rid oneself of it. This, they would argue, was only possible through belief in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:19-20, 5:1). The Proto-Orthodox also claimed that some of the Jewish laws, such as circumcision and the prohibition against unclean food were useless and not necessary for salvation (Rom 2; Mt. 7:14-23).

Topics such as these became looming concerns for individual Christians and Christian communities alike. Paul, a former Pharisee, constantly struggled with Christianity's relation to Judaism. He frequently wrote both to the Romans and to the Ephesians at length about the Law and what it meant to be a Jew or a Christian, emphasizing that God abolished the Law and united people under one humanity (Eph. 2; Rom. 2-4). While Paul is by no means consistent with his regard to Judaism, his own anxieties about its relation to Christianity are clearly reflected in many communities. People wanted to know exactly where they stood in relation to Judaism, and for centuries onward, Christians began to flesh out this idea.

¹⁴ See for example, "The Epistle of Barnabas" ch. 5, in Early Christian Writings, 164.

It was into this world of strife and contention that Proto-Orthodox Christianity was born, struggling to define and defend itself against the unrelenting pressure of both internal and external forces. They faced persecution from all sides as they sought to chisel out a sliver of existence for themselves. The Jews dismissed them as false Jews, other Christians denounced them as heretical Christians, and the Roman Empire even had them rounded up and executed for their refusal to sacrifice to the Pagan gods. Despite this opposition, Christianity grew and flourished, spreading steadily across the ancient world.

Historiography and Argument

While the majority of historians agree on the historical context into which Christianity arose, the subject of the role of the body in early Christianity has sparked debate among scholars for decades. Traditionally, historians have argued that Christianity has always maintained a dualistic understanding of personhood, envisioning the soul and body as separate entities. Within dualism, the soul, the purer and more Godly aspect of a person, must work to control the corrupting influence of the body. The flesh in this world represents a person's basest desires; it is not good in-and-of itself, but can be trained to act rightly once its carnality has been subdued. Many Christians today maintain a less severe, yet still dualistic, sense of personhood, believing that, upon death, only their soul rises to heaven to be with God. While these men and women may envision themselves as somehow embodied when they reside in heaven, they certainly do not believe that they are clothed in their earthly bodies. Because this dualistic conceptualization has been maintained for so long, scholars have come to assume that Christians have always felt their way about themselves.

Recently, however, a handful of historians such as Elizabeth Clark have come to the realization that the Proto-Orthodox Christians actually held a monistic view of psychophysical selfhood.¹⁵ Instead of maintaining that their souls reigned over their bodies, the Proto-Orthodox believed that the two parts themselves lived in unison and could not be separated from one another and still form a complete human being. A person was neither just a mind worshipping God, nor a body carrying out his will. Both aspects of a person had to exist in harmony for a person to live out his or his life to its fullest extent. When discussing this novel conception of personhood, however, historians rarely seek to validate the body, but instead continue to emphasize the importance of the soul, acknowledging the body only as a valuable tool, or a means to a higher spiritual end.

One of the ways Christians have traditionally achieved a higher spiritual plane is through asceticism, that is, the mortification of the flesh. Within the last twenty years, however, great debate has arisen over the definition and application of the term “ascetic.” “The standard text-book approach to asceticism” Elizabeth Clark argues, “is in urgent need of nuance....”¹⁶ Yet how should one define this complicated term, and to whom can it be applied? In order to answer these pressing questions two separate conferences were held. First, the Society of Biblical Literature Group on Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity met throughout the 1980s, yet never agreed upon a definition. They did eventually manage to define “ascetic behavior” by stressing a range of responses to a social, political, or physical world which was deemed to be unsupportive or unfriendly.¹⁷

¹⁵ Elizabeth Clark, Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 17.

¹⁶ Clark, Reading Renunciation, 17.

¹⁷ Clark, Reading Renunciation, 14.

While this may have soothed some anxieties concerning the application of this word, many historians, Clark included, felt this conceptualization to be unsatisfactory. Thus, in 1997 a conference met in Toronto which called upon over a dozen scholars to present on one section of the New Testament, define asceticism, and search for its use within the specific text. Once again, no consensus was reached, as men and women attempted to historicize the phenomenon and understand its meaning in the ancient world. Despite this lack of a definitive conclusion, the conceptualization of the term “ascetic” has evolved to embody a more optimistic view of psychophysical selfhood. Instead of interpreting these practices as a punishment of the body, historians have come to view them as improvements.¹⁸

Even though numerous books have been written in an attempt to understand asceticism through the eyes of an early Christian, many practices and experiences which contradict asceticism, or have nothing to do with it, remain unexamined in relation to the body. The majority of historians, when drawing from biblical texts, typically focus upon the teachings or theology expressed in their narrative while at the same time doubting the veracity of many of the actions and occurrences described. While historians may not be able to take these events as fact, their abundance in the gospels should not be overlooked or lightly dismissed. Clearly these stories were significant and meaningful for ancient Christians, and their belief in such miracles outweighs the value of debating their literal occurrence.

When scholars do occasionally examine the occurrence of miracles in the canonical gospels, they tend to interpret them metaphorically. For example in her essay on asceticism in Luke, Susan Garrett briefly touches on healing, yet portrays it only as an

¹⁸ Clark Reading Renunciation, 17.

allusion for the improvement of the soul.¹⁹ Not only does the actual occurrence of such a phenomenon seem impossible to many scholars, but also in a dualistic world-view one would not favor the body in any way, and so a literal reading of these stories would make little sense. If the historian takes into account the ancient Christians' psychophysical understanding of themselves, however, the healing miracles illuminate the Proto-Orthodox's belief that the body should be cured alongside the soul.

Recently, coinciding with advances in both medicine and psychology, another interpretation of healing has arisen. Some scholars, while seeking to understand the physical ailments and subsequent cures throughout the gospels, interpret these events literally and attempt to explain them biologically. The first route taken by J. Keir Howard identifies the diseases, their treatments, and their social significance in the time of Jesus.²⁰ The other, articulated by Amanda Porterfield, illuminates the possibilities of faith healing.²¹ While these two explanations place the world of modern medicine upon the first century AD to encourage the modern reader to accept these miracles as fact, they inadvertently validate the body as well. In both cases, Jesus demonstrated specific concern for the physical well-being of his followers and actively cured them of their ailments to restore them to complete personhood. The practice of bodily healing, therefore, played an active role in the lives of the Proto-Orthodox.

Finally, historians study many other aspects of early Christianity, yet rarely relate them to the psychophysical understanding of selfhood or reflections on the body. What food a person feeds her body, the care she gives it when it is sick, her everyday

¹⁹ Garrett, "Beloved Physician of the Soul?" in Asceticism and the New Testament (New York: Routledge, 1999), 74-82.

²⁰ J. Keir Howard, Disease and Healing in the New Testament: An Analysis and Interpretation. (Lanham: University Press of America Inc, 2001).

²¹ Amanda Porterfield "Healing in the History of Christianity" Church History, no. 2 (2002), 227-242.

experiences with its wants and needs, and her understanding of her own mortality all reflect how she views herself. People have to deal with their bodies on a daily basis, and the Proto-Orthodox's bodies encompassed half of who they were and claimed equal importance to the soul.

This thesis, therefore, argues for the valuation of the body as articulated in Christian stories and traditions, such as the performance of miracles, healing, birth, rebirth, and martyrdom. The examination of the physical experiences in Proto-Orthodox Christianity has remained unstudied for too long, as scholars have focused on the theological or psychological reasoning behind such occurrences. Yet understanding the way these early men and women viewed their bodies in relation to themselves and their communities will reveal a richer view of the early Christian world.

In order to examine this topic in depth, I have limited the scope of this thesis from 30 AD, around the time of Jesus' death, to about 300 AD.²² Christianity radically transformed within the first three centuries, growing from a small following of twelve men to the religion of an entire empire. Within this time, Christian leaders and their communities did not systematically work through one issue at a time before moving on to the next, but instead were forced to deal with many pressing questions simultaneously, as they attempted to sort through their doctrine and figure out how to survive in this rapidly evolving world. Reflecting this trend, my thesis will not progress in strict chronological order, but instead will focus on the issues central to the Proto-Orthodox's understand of themselves and their bodies, and how these issues developed over time.

²² Both Joyce E. Salisbury and Phyllis Tickle note a shift in Christianity from a monistic to a dualistic understanding of selfhood around this time. Joyce E. Salisbury, The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 33-35; Phyllis Tickle, The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 161-163.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter of my thesis will explore the positive relationship between food, healing, and the body in Proto-Orthodox Christianity. Food played an incredibly important and central role in the lives of the Proto-Orthodox, and food narratives are subsequently abundant in the Gospel narratives. The evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) wrote about how Jesus fed thousands of people because he was concerned for their wellbeing (Mt. 14:13-21; Mk. 6:32-44; Lk. 9:10-17; Jn. 6:1-15), how he encouraged his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry (Mt. 12:1-9), and how he commanded his disciples and all those who called themselves Christians to feed the needy once he had departed from this earth (Lk. 3:8-12).

These traditions on food differed markedly from other religions of their day. Jews, for example, defined themselves through the exclusivity of their eating laws. Not only did they restrict the types of clean and unclean meat they could eat and how they could eat it, but they also restricted whom they could eat it with (Lev. 11:1-77). Gnostics too maintained distinct dietary traditions. Instead of merely restricting what food could be eaten and when, they practiced regular fasting. Food to this group represented yet another evil in this world, and the intake of it therefore had to be limited and controlled so that the body did not glut itself and subsequently pull the soul down into its base desires.²³

Yet unlike the Gnostics, Proto-Orthodox not only fed the hungry, but also cured the sick and handicapped of their afflictions so that they could become a whole person once again. As Jesus travelled from city to city with his disciples, large crowds of men and women gathered around him, not only to hear him preach, but to be healed (Mt. 8:16-

²³ “Authoritative Teaching” from The Nag Hammadi Library.

17, 12:15-21, 14:34-36, 15:29-31, 19:1-2; Mk. 1:32-34, 3:7-12, 6:53-56, 7:31-37; Lk. 6:17-19). He even, despite the societal taboos about associating with such people, restored the bodies of lepers and others with physically debilitating diseases.²⁴ The healing of others become so much a part of what it meant to be a Christian that Jesus commanded his disciples and all who would follow his teachers to cure those in need (Mt. 10:1-16; Mk. 6:7-11; Lk. 9:1, 6:12-16, 9:2-5, 10:3). By feeding and healing thousands of men and women, Jesus and his disciples showed concern, not for people's lives in the world to come, but for their bodies here and now.

The second chapter of this thesis will shift from examining daily practices to the Proto-Orthodox's conceptualization of birth and rebirth. Like their Jewish ancestors who prayed for children and joyously celebrated the birth of many sons and daughters, the Proto-Orthodox reveled in birth, especially in that of their savior.²⁵ Unlike many Gnostics who believed that Christ was never physically born because they viewed flesh as evil and therefore as something God would never assume, the Proto-Orthodox vehemently argued that Christ was physically born of Mary.²⁶ Because the Proto-Orthodox, writing after the death of Jesus, knew that his suffering and death upon the cross would deliver them from sin, it was of the upmost importance that he literally be born in the flesh. This flesh, the Proto-Orthodox maintained, was not divine or Godly, or in any way different for their own, but instead was mortal, human, skin and bones. God had chosen for his son to be clothed in a human body so that he could redeem human

²⁴ See Jerry Toner Popular Culture in Ancient Rome (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 75, and his chapter entitled "Metal Health" for more information on Ancient people's perceptions and attitudes towards disease.

²⁵ For stories of Jewish birth narratives see Gen. 17-18, 20-21, 29:3-30:22; for Christian birth narratives see Mt. 1:18-25; Lk. 2:1-7.

²⁶ See for example Ignatius's "Epistle to the Smyrnaeans" in Early Christian Writings 87. In his "Epistle to the Philippians" Ignatius even says that "to deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is to be Antichrist". Ignatius, "Epistle to the Philippians" in Early Christian Writings, 121.

bodies. God would not have allowed his son to assume anything he found debasing or corrupting, nor would he choose to save something for which he held no love. The fact that the Proto-Orthodox believed that God had sent his son in the flesh reveals the respect these men and women held for their own bodies.

Yet not only was Christ born in the flesh once, but twice. All four of the gospels tell of how, after three days, several women went to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body, only to find the tomb empty and Jesus gone (Mt. 28:1-11; Mk. 16:1-8; Lk. 24:1-12; Jn. 20:1-10). For Christ, as these women would come to discover, had defeated death, not by his soul ascending to heaven to live forever, but by being born again in the very flesh in which he had died. Jesus, according to the Gospel of John, even ordered Thomas, one of his disciples, to touch the wounds where the nails pierced his hands on the cross, clearly indicating his bodily resurrection (Jn. 2:24-29). This story indeed acts as an anti-Gnostic polemic, condemning both Thomas, the supposed author of the Gnostic text "The Gospel of Thomas," and the Gnostic belief that Christ was never physically reborn.²⁷

Not only did Christians believe that their savior was physically reincarnated, but that they would be as well. Unlike contemporary Christianity which teaches that, upon death, the soul leaves the body to reside in heaven with God, the Proto-Orthodox believed that when they died they ceased to exist. They therefore asserted that on Judgment Day Christ would raise both the soul and body to be judged together. This person would receive either paradise or punishment, depending upon the actions he or she performed in life, yet would be physically embodied either way. Surely the Proto-Orthodox would not go beyond all other religions of their day to insist that the entire person, both body and soul, would gain immortality if they thought the body to be unworthy of redemption.

²⁷ Elaine Pagels, Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas, (New York: Random House, 2003), 34.

The third and final chapter of my thesis will focus not on life, but on death, specifically on the death of Christian martyrs. Martyrdom was a novel concept in the ancient world, originally pertaining to one who was a witness, in a legal sense, to the passion of Christ.²⁸ Martyrs were put to death because they refused to deny that their savior had suffered and died for their sins, and through their own brutal tortures and deaths, the bodies of these men and women bore witness to Christ's passion. Many martyrs, like Ignatius of Antioch who died between 98 and 117 AD, desperately yearned to share in the pain Christ felt and relate to him on a deeply bodily level.²⁹ Other men and women, however, understandably feared such torture, and so the Proto-Orthodox began to preach that martyrs actually felt nothing during their trials because Christ resided in their bodies and alleviated their pain.³⁰ Spectators thus did not hear one moan escape the lips of martyrs because Christ, out of love for their bodies, released the martyrs from all pain while still allowing their bodies to bear witness to him.

Upon the death of the martyrs, the Proto-Orthodox began to collect what little scraps of bone remained. While at first these men and women merely venerated these remains, their treatment of the flesh of the martyr soon went beyond what Romans considered "decent", as they began to kiss the bones and even treat them as holy objects.³¹ Because God had been physically present with the martyr when he or she died, God's power remained in the bones. To the Proto-Orthodox, the flesh itself was holy. They believed that the bones could, like Christ, perform healing miracles and cure the

²⁸ Everet Furgeson Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries, 212.

²⁹ Ignatius, "Letter to the Romans" in Early Christian Writings, 87. Ignatius also states that "it is only in the name of Jesus Christ, and for the sake of sharing His sufferings, that I could face all this." Ignatius, "Letter to the Symerians" in Early Christian Writings, 102.

³⁰ Staniforth, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" ch.2 in Early Christian Writings.

³¹ Peter Brown The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 4.

body of its afflictions.³² Even flesh which had been torn apart by animals held not disgust, but great value to the Proto-Orthodox. These men and women esteemed all flesh, no matter its condition, for God had bestowed it upon them as a blessing worthy not only of their love, but his.

³² Salisbury, The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence, 50.

Chapter One:

Uplifting the Body

Because men and women deal with their bodies every day of their lives, rarely do they, on a conscious level, contemplate how their actions mirror their attitudes towards their physical selves. Yet, what they eat, how they dress, what they do when they are sick, and how much they exercise all reveal peoples' concern, or lack there of, for their physical well-being. While these actions may seem mundane, in actuality they have a tremendous influence of people's self-image. Similarly, the Proto-Orthodox's novel treatment of their bodies reflect their perception of themselves as psychophysical beings, as they loved and cared for their bodies and the bodies of others more than any other religious group of their day. Even though many members of this new religion had grown up in a Jewish community which valued the body but was so concerned for its purity that it severely limited what food could be eaten and even shunned the diseased or disabled members of their own community, the Proto-Orthodox frequently, following the example of Jesus, overthrew these laws and began to actively care for body. In the Canonical Gospels, for example, Jesus feeds thousands of people so that they do not go home hungry and heals the diseases and disabilities of many more.³³ As demonstrated by the consideration and concern the Proto-Orthodox showed for their bodies and their description of their savior as healing and feeding multitudes of believers, the Proto-Orthodox reveal the importance of their physical bodies as an essential aspect of their selfhood.

³³ The Canonical Gospels are the accounts of Mark (written 68 to 70 AD), Matthew and Luke (c. 80-90 AD) and John (90 to 100 AD).

Food

When studying food in the ancient world, historians frequently examine the traditions in which food played a part, or the societal laws which dictated what types of food that should be eaten and when, yet rarely do they relate it to reflections on the body. Yet, as David Kraemer, the author of Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages reminds his readers, “it is widely assumed that people’s eating habits somehow express who they are. Common experience supports this notion.”³⁴ For the Proto-Orthodox, their relationship to food and eating displayed the value they placed on their bodies.

It is remarkable, in fact, how extensively food permeates the Gospels, as even the majority of Jesus’ teachings occur at a meal of some sort. On one occasion, for example, when Jesus dines with the Pharisees, a woman and known sinner enters the house (Lk. 7:36-50). Weeping, she washes Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and then anoints them with oil. Horrified, the Pharisees insist that if Jesus was truly a prophet, he would have recognized this woman as a sinner, and therefore would not have let her touch him. Jesus calmly informs the Pharisees that this woman will be forgiven and enter into heaven before those who require little forgiveness. The fact that this teaching, and many others besides, takes place at a meal receives little attention, as the lesson in the story receives the majority of the focus. Yet this seemingly insignificant detail continually emphasizes Jesus’ positive association with food and bodily nourishment throughout the Gospels.

Several important hallmarks of Christianity also occur at meals or feasts. What has been dubbed the ‘Last Supper’ constitutes perhaps the most significant meal within

³⁴ David Kraemer, Jewish Eating and Identity through the Ages, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.

the Canonical Gospels (Mt. 26:26-30; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:14-23). Here, Jesus not only revealed to all that he will be betrayed by Judas, but also broke bread and poured wine so that his disciples would remember him and all that he did for the world. “Take, eat” he commanded his disciples, offering them bread, “this is my body.” Then proffering a cup of wine, “drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt.26:26-29). Jesus thus offered not only spiritual sustenance, but physical as well. His body now contained the power to nourish both men’s bodies and their souls. Christians subsequently began to gather around this tradition of what would become communion, not only to remember their savior, but also to find unity in taking a meal together and eating and drinking with one another.³⁵

Jesus himself reinforces this tradition when, after he has been crucified but before he has made himself known to his disciples, he appears to two of them on the road (Lk. 24:13-35). While he talks to his disciples in depth and counsels them on many matters, not until he dines with them, blessing their food and then breaking bread, do the disciples recognize Jesus for who he is. Jesus did not purposefully disguise himself before, nor choose to reveal himself the moment they sat down to eat, but instead the act of eating itself brought to light his true nature. These first- and second-century Christians believed that Jesus came to earth to sustain them not only in spirit, but in body as well. He *was* their bread and he *was* their wine. Neither physical nor spiritual sustenance alone was enough, but both were needed together.

Indeed, many of the miracle stories throughout the Canonical Gospels reflect this belief, even though they suffer from a lack of interest from historians because they have traditionally been seen as demonstrations of God’s divine power, and therefore not

³⁵ “The Didache” in Early Christian Writings, 195.

historical fact. But just as historians understand the power of Zeus to throw lightning bolts or Poseidon to control the seas as the Romans' fear of and subsequent attempt to understand the natural world, so it is useful for them to historicize the powers of the Christian Son of God.

The very first miracle in the "Gospel of John", for example, occurs at a wedding feast. When the party runs out of wine, Jesus' mother Mary informs him of the situation. Ordering slaves to fill six stone jars with water, Jesus then commands them to draw some out and take it to the chief steward. Miraculously, the water in the basin has become wine, and everyone, except the slaves, is amazed and does not know the origin of the excellent wine as Jesus tells no one of what he has done (Jn. 2:1-12). John includes no lesson with this story of Jesus' power, nor does he have Jesus himself explain his doings. Instead, he concludes this tale with "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Canaan of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed him" (Jn. 2:12). Thus, the Son of God chose to demonstrate his powers first, not openly and in an astounding way, but simply to make the party more enjoyable and for the pleasure of its guest. The preliminary miracle involves little more than Jesus providing for the physical satisfaction of many people. Yet clearly, to both John and his audience, the fact that Jesus demonstrated his power and chose to reveal himself in such a way was crucial to their conception of the savior. First and foremost their savior cared for their bodies and their happiness.

The feeding of the five thousand constitutes perhaps the most prominent of the food miracles, the only miracle story, except the resurrection of Jesus, to occur in all four Canonical Gospels (Mt. 14:13-21; Mk. 6:32-44; Lk. 9:10-17; Jn. 6:1-15). The story

begins with men and women flocking to Jesus to be healed and hear him teach the word of God, sitting in rapture until nightfall without so much as a morsel of food to eat. As the day grows to a close, the disciples urge Jesus to send the people home to eat because they do not have enough food to feed such a crowd. Up until this point, the authors have not included a single word spoken by their savior. Not until Jesus rebukes his disciples, commanding that they “give [the crowd] something to eat” (Mt. 14:16), does a word of his teachings make it onto the page.

Jesus expresses his desire to nourish the bodies of the hungry crowd perhaps more eloquently in a similar tale of the feeding of four thousand found in Matthew and Mark, in which he says, speaking again for the first time in this story, “I have compassion for the crowd because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way” (Mt. 15:32; Mk. 8:1-10). Each gospel writer chose not to include the subject of Jesus’ lengthy sermon but his concern for his people’s physical well-being. All accounts of these miracles specifically choose to portray Jesus’ compassion, which in the eyes of the Gospel writers constitutes an essential aspect of both Jesus’ character and the foundation of budding Christ beliefs of budding Proto-Orthodoxy.

Those men and women who claimed to follow Christ began to define themselves and to be defined, after Jesus’ example, by what they ate and by their concomitant respect for their physical bodies. In fact, Jesus and his followers were so well known for their eating habits which differed from Judaism to such an extent that a group of tax collectors remarked on how strange it was that these Christians continue to eat and drink while the disciples of the Pharisees and even those of John regularly fasted (Lk. 5:33). The

dichotomy between fasting and eating even became a sign that one practiced the Proto-Orthodox faith, as in the story of the conversion of Saul. One morning as Saul, a Jew, rode to Damascus, a great light suddenly appeared all around him and the resounding voice of Jesus asked Saul why he persecuted him (Acts 9:1-18). As a punishment for Saul's persecution of Christians, Jesus told Saul to enter the city and there he would be told what to do. When Saul arose, he realized that he was blind, and for three days neither saw, ate, nor drank. Once in Damascus, Saul happened upon Anaias who had been sent by the Lord to help him. When Anaias laid his hands upon Saul, his sight immediately returned. Giving thanks to God, Saul was baptized and took food to regain his strength. In this story, Luke clearly portrays God as caring for the needs of his people while punishing those who do not believe. As this story works on both metaphorical and literal levels, Saul can neither see the path of righteousness nor the path before his feet because of his blindness. So too does Saul hunger for the food of Life and also for physical food to restore his bodily strength and quiet his rumbling stomach. God provides all of these things to those who believe. Without him, Luke shows how people have nothing either physically or spiritually, but with him they are fully whole and satisfied.

Not only did the Proto-Orthodox define themselves by how much they ate, but by what they ate as well. The Jewish Law contained strict regulations about what was to be eaten, how it should be eaten, and even when it should be eaten, yet the Proto-Orthodox rejected almost all of these restrictions (Lev. 11:1-77).³⁶ In Matthew's Gospel, for

³⁶ For example, a Jew should not eat camel, hare, or pig, for they are unclean, but may eat everything from the water which has scales. Many kinds of birds as well should not be eaten, along with four-legged insects. Certain animals are deemed consumable by how "clean" they are, and this chapter details these

example, Jesus and his disciples walk through a field on the Sabbath and pick grains to eat because they are hungry (Mt. 12:1-9). When the Pharisees see this they grow extremely irate, arguing that it is not lawful to do work on the Sabbath. Jesus responds calmly, insisting that the Pharisees themselves do not understand, and that his disciples have done nothing wrong. While this story can be read to show the rejection and redefining of the Sabbath in Proto-Orthodox Christianity, the way in which the disciples act on this day is equally as important: they choose to eat.

The Gospel of Mark describes another occasion when Jesus and his disciples eat with several Pharisees and scribes. When dinner begins, the Pharisees become angry because the disciples do not wash their hands before eating, thus rejecting the Law. Jesus, undaunted, retorts, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile,” for food merely enters a person’s stomach and then the exits into the sewer, whereas evil intentions spring from a person’s heart (Mk. 7:14-23). Not only has Jesus declared all foods clean, but the body as well. Dualism insists that the mind must subdue the corrupting and debasing body, and that all evil manifests itself in the physical, yet here Jesus proclaims just the opposite: the soul, not the body, begets evil.

In sharp contrast, Gnosticism insists that the physical defiles while only the pure soul and light of truth contains purity. This group continually denies the body in favor of the soul, as they believe that only through rigid asceticism and fasting can one know God. The “Testimony of Truth,” a Gnostic document written between 180-220 A.D. setting out to defend these beliefs and oppose contrasting ideas, firmly states that no one knows the

specific animals. Also, these animals can only be prepared and served in a certain way. Meat, for example, cannot be served with dairy because the two eaten together cause impurity.

God of truth unless he “has subdued desire in every way within himself” thus restraining the corruptible flesh.³⁷

These two contrasting ways of valuing the body result from each sect’s conceptualization of food and its effect on the body. Quite naturally, as reflected in their ascetic practices, the Gnostics generally envisioned food as an evil, a temptation used to lure the soul into the snare of physical pleasure. Unlike the Canonical Gospels which overflow with an abundance of images of food and eating, relatively few such images make their way into Gnostic texts, and the few that do always contain negative connotations. In Gnostic discourse, images of food and drink play an important role in “imprisoning the soul”, and thus fasting helps the ascetic to overcome the temptations and desires associated with the lowly flesh.³⁸ For example, in “Authoritative Teaching” a text which details a Gnostic creation myth written between 150-200 A.D., the author tells a story about a fisherman casting many types of food into the water to ensnare the fish. The fish, enticed by the smell, eats the morsel, but the hook hidden in the food immediately catches the fish and drags it to the surface. In this myth, the fish represents the people of the world, as the fisherman, their adversary, waits to trap them. The food, while it can be understood literally, also alludes to the “(things) which belong to this world” which will seize men and women and force them into slavery.³⁹ Indeed, once men and women partake in one delight, their appetite becomes insatiable. Ultimately these worldly pleasures which lead to one’s final demise become the “food of death.”⁴⁰

Because the Gnostics felt no love for the body, which they believed was created only to

³⁷ “Testimony of Truth” in The Nag Hammadi Library

³⁸ PHEME PERKINS, “Creation of the Body in Gnosticism” in Religious Reflections on the Human Body, ed. Jane Marie Law (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 23.

³⁹ “Authoritative Teaching” in The Nag Hammadi Library

⁴⁰ “Authoritative Teaching” in The Nag Hammadi Library

capture and debase their souls, they would have no love for food which would not only provide bodily pleasure, but would also nourish it and help it grow strong or worse, gluttonous.

While gluttony worried the Proto-Orthodox as well, the people to whom they preached were seldom in danger of over-indulgence. Food provides strength and vitality for the body, allowing it to perform its God-given functions better and indeed to spread the word of God to the rest of the world. Jesus did not feed the immensely wealthy in danger of indulgence in succulent feasts (indeed, he preached that this sort of lifestyle should be abandoned to follow God) but to the poor or less well off.⁴¹ Mary Anne Tolbert even postulates that being fed was a miracle in and of itself for many people.⁴²

Food was a luxury for the poor and working class people to whom the disciples first preached the word of God. These people depended on their bodies for the livelihood, and thus on food to sustain themselves physically. Food thus constituted one of their dearest commodities and the images in the Gospels reflect just such an attitude. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.” Luke writes. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled” (Lk. 6:20-21). This Beatitude promises that those who believe in God and his son will be fed in *this* life, that the physical well being of the Christian people is important to God *right now*. While Matthew’s beatitude differs slightly in that it anticipates a world to come, it still reflects the current situation of the people, and uses food imagery as a metaphor for satisfying

⁴¹ For example, Matthew quotes Jesus saying, “if you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give money to the poor... [for] it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Mt. 19:21-24.

⁴² Mary Anne Tolbert, “Asceticism in Mark’s Gospel” in Asceticism and the New Testament, 40.

those who believe (Mt. 5:3-6).⁴³

The inclusion of both Beatitudes of Matthew and Luke in every step of the canonization process clearly show that the Proto-Orthodox believed that their God would attend not only to their souls in years to come, but their bodies at this moment, providing them with both hope and physical nourishment. The mutually reinforcing metaphors of food tied with literal eating and drinking continue when the gospel writers speak about the food of eternal life, for “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (4:1-11).

Unlike the Gnostics who speak of the food of death which tethers them to the world below, the Proto-Orthodox consistently speak of the food of life as freeing them to experience the world to come. Indeed, when John details the tale of Jesus’ trip to Galilee, he describes how Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink of water from a well. She asks him how he, a Jew, can request water from her, and he in turn explains to her about the water of eternal life. “Everyone who drinks this [well] water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty again. The water I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (Jn.4:4-15). The woman then says to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty...” (Jn. 4:14), then goes forth to proclaim to all that a man calling himself the messiah has come at last. All of these literal images of food coinciding with metaphorical ones assure Christ’s followers that they will not only be physically provided for in this life, but in the next as well.⁴⁴

⁴³ Matthew’s beatitude reads, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven....Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

⁴⁴ For another example of the mutually reinforcing images of food and drink see the last supper in Mt. 26:21-25; Mk. 14:18-21; Lk. 22.1-23; Jn. 13:21-30

Indeed, when envisioning the kingdom of heaven, what person, poor dejected and hungry, could imagine a better paradise than one where they were constantly fed? “I assign to you a kingdom” Jesus informs his disciples, “that you may eat and drink at my table” (Lk. 22:24-30). At this kingdom will be a harvest, where all who labor, no matter for how long, will take part in its bounty. Here, the poor will be clothed and fed, and the woes of life shall be left behind.

Yet one is not automatically accepted into this paradise. The disciples and numerous other followers ask Jesus what they are to do to achieve this kingdom and his advice is nearly always the same: “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Lk. 3:10-14).⁴⁵ In John’s Gospel, Jesus gives the same advice, explaining that “whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise” (Lk. 3:8-12). Anyone claiming to be Christian must help those less fortunate than him or herself, not just by praying or teaching the word of God, but by aiding people physically. Jesus taught these men and women to care for the well-being of their brethren in *this* world, not just focus on the purity of their souls alone and rejoice in the suffering of their bodies, as the Gnostics chose to do.

Healing

Another way in which Jesus showed love and concern for people’s bodies was through the healing of thousands of men and women. Just as with the miracles of loaves and fishes, the miraculous healing stories do not exist simply to attest to the greatness of God, but to demonstrate the importance of compassion for human beings. Jesus himself turns none away who display faith, and frequently heals great multitudes of people. As his fame spread, crowds of people flocked to him, not to hear him preach, but simply to

⁴⁵ See also “You will know them by their fruits” Mt. 7:15-20; Lk 6.43

be healed (Mt. 8:16-17, 12:15-21, 14:34-36, 15:29-31, 19:1-2; Mk. 1:32-34, 3:7-12, 6:53-56, 7:31-37; Lk. 6:17-19). Indeed, the ability to cure illnesses and physical ailments become a hallmark of God's power. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, for example, relate a conversation between an imprisoned John the Baptist and Jesus. John sends two messengers to ask Jesus "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus, having cured many, sends back the reply, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Mt. 11:2-6).⁴⁶ People thus recognized the Son of God, the savior they have so long awaited, for his ability to cure people not metaphorically but literally. "Go and tell John what you have *seen*" Jesus commands the messengers.

Not surprisingly, stories of healing and exorcisms make up one fifth of the canonical gospels, with 72 accounts and 41 unique episodes.⁴⁷ In nearly all of these accounts, men, women and children are cured of physically hindering or alienating ailments including lameness, blindness, deafness, and even leprosy and dropsy. Such infirmities visibly separated these people from the rest of society, and they were shunned or even cast out because of their deformities.⁴⁸ The cripples and the blind men in the tales, for example, are almost always begging for alms when Jesus restores them to full health (Mk. 10:36; Lk. 18:35; Jn. 9:8). Without the use of their limbs or their eyes they would not have been able to work to support themselves and thus would have been forced

⁴⁶ See also, Lk. 1:18-23

⁴⁷ Amanda Porterfield. "Healing in the History of Christianity", 282.

⁴⁸ Jerry Toner writes these men and women would have been abandoned by their families and even spit upon by passersby. See Jerry Toner Popular Culture in Ancient Rome (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 75. For a more detailed examination of the treatment of the diseased and disabled in Ancient Rome see the chapter "Mental Health" in Toner's Popular Culture in Ancient Rome.

on to the streets to beg for a living.

Similarly, ancient people regarded leprosy as a particularly loathsome disease. Because the cause and cure was unknown, the outside world only saw the afflicted's skin lesions and their bodies slowly wasting away. Not wanting to catch this abominable affliction, the townspeople sent lepers away to live amongst themselves, not daring to draw near enough to even offer them a few pennies.⁴⁹ Even the woman with the hemorrhage would have found herself on the outskirts of society, as the Jewish community would have seen her as continually unclean, and thus unfit to commune properly with others (Ezek. 22:10).

Instead of shunning these outcasts along with the rest of society or telling them to focus upon the goodness of their souls because that would ultimately save them, Jesus healed them completely. He did not care what they looked like, if they could not work, or even what class they belonged to. To him, the physical well-being of a centurion's slave mattered equally as much as that of Peter's mother-in-law (Lk 7:2; Mt. 8:14). He welcomed everyone not only into his loyal band of followers, but back into society at large. He did not care what others thought of his unorthodox practices, but continued to help everyone no matter his or her status.

Even on the Sabbath, a day on which all Jews rested, Jesus ignored the Law and healed those in need. On two separate occasions the question about whether it was lawful to cure on the Sabbath is raised. While the Pharisees often grow angry when Jesus heals men and women on that day, Jesus just as quickly rebukes them, telling them that if they had an animal or even a child who fell into a well, they would rush to its aid because it is

⁴⁹ Jews deemed lepers "impure", and thus unfit to associate with clean peoples. See for example Lev. 13-14.

precious to them (Lk. 13:10-17, 14:1-6). This care thus extends not only to farm animals and family members, but also to all members of the human race in need. By curing people on this holy day, Jesus makes bodies themselves holy as well. On one particular Sabbath when Jesus teaches in a Synagogue, the Scribes and Pharisees bring him a man with a withered hand to see if he would heal it, and thus find an accusation against him (Mt. 12:9-14; Mk. 3:1-6; Lk. 6:6-11). Knowing this plot full well, Jesus tells the afflicted man to stretch out his hand, and proceeded to restore it to full health. This man's hand could easily, and probably did, prevent him from earning a livelihood, possibly reducing him to the status of a beggar.

On another Sabbath, Luke tells of when Jesus visited Nain and saw a dead man, a widow's only son, being carried out of the village. "When the Lord saw her" Luke writes, "he had compassion for her" (Lk. 7:11-17). Not only did this woman's beloved child die, but with him her only hope of survival. This society demanded that sons hold jobs and support their aging parents when they could no longer provide for themselves. Without her only son, this woman would have been destitute, relying on the generosity of her friends for support, but never living as she would have under her son's care. Jesus thus saved two lives that day: the son's and his mother's. Not only was a whole healthy body needed to survive in the world, but also to worship God and proclaim his word to the fullest extent. The first thing that the cured men and women do is go forth praising God and telling all of what has occurred. Even when Jesus orders them to be silent they do not listen (Mk. 1:44-45, 5:43, 8:26; Lk. 5:14). The crowds too spread what they have seen far and wide, praising God and solidifying Jesus' reputation as savior and healer.

Because these people proclaim what they have seen with their own eyes, not just

what they hear about in parables, healing is not simply a metaphor for the forgiveness of sin. Only one story shared by three of the gospels mentions the forgiveness of sin alongside healing. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus informs a paralyzed man that his sins have been forgiven and *then* commands him to stand up and walk (Mt. 9:1-8; Mk. 2:1-12; Lk. 5:17-26). The forgiveness of sin does not automatically grant the man full use of his legs, as it would have done if the sin had been what crippled him in the first place. Instead, Jesus cures both his soul *and* his body to restore the man completely.

Later in John's Gospel Jesus himself refutes the belief that sin causes deformities or that deformities are a sign of sin. As Jesus and his disciples walk along a road they happen upon a man blind since birth. "Rabbi" the disciples ask, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answers, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him" (Lk 9:1-4). Making mud, Jesus covers this man's eyes and told him to go wash in the pool of Sloam, which immediately cures him of his blindness. This man literally becomes an instrument of God. To assure people of his power, God does not produce terrible storms, but heals the incapacitated. The Proto-Orthodox thus believed that God sent Jesus to earth not only to heal people's souls, but their bodies as well.

In contrast, the Gnostics never sought to heal their bodies, which they believed evil created to ensnare them. Thus instead of an outward transformation, these men and women only desired to transform their souls. For this reason, the Gnostics rarely spoke of healing, and when they did they explained it purely allegorically and metaphorically. Healing in Gnostic texts never occurs at a specific moment in time, nor does it occur to

named individuals. Instead, when referencing healing, the Gnostics speak only of their souls. Before Jesus came into this world to deliver the secret knowledge to the select few, the soul was blind. The soul thought that the pleasures and delights of this world were real and could not see through the “ignorance and malice of the powers that ruled the cosmos.”⁵⁰ Luckily, God sent Jesus to the souls trapped in human flesh, and cured them of their blindness through his healing word. Because of this knowledge, the soul could now see through the veil of the physical realm to the divine one beyond, and could therefore focus all of its efforts on escaping the physical imitations in favor of reason.⁵¹

The stories of the blind soul or individual are the only healing miracles found within the Gnostic corpus. While they clearly draw on many elements of Proto-Orthodox Christianity, the occurrence of only a single disability suggests that ancient peoples did not read the other stories of physical healing in the Canonical Gospels simply as metaphor. “Authoritative Teaching,” for example, does not waver in its belief that only the soul can and should be healed while the body should be left to rot.⁵² Nowhere in the numerous Gnostic collections of Jesus’ sayings does he say “your faith has made you well” (Mk. 5:34; Mt 9:22; Lk 17.19) as he does so often in the Proto-Orthodox Gospels. The Gnostics clearly did not want to leave any doubt about their feelings toward the body and physical realm. While they were willing to stretch the food metaphor like their Christian counterparts, they were not willing to go as far as literal physical healing. They wanted nothing to do with this world and therefore had no interest in healing the body.

⁵⁰ Pheme Perkins, Gnosticism, New Testament, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 145.

⁵¹ “Authoritative teaching” in The Nag Hammadi Library. For other references to blindness see “The Gospel of Truth” And Blessed is he who has opened the eyes of the blind’; and “The Gospel of Thomas” ‘And my soul became afflicted for the sons of men, because they are blind and their hearts do not have sight’. Both in The Nag Hammadi Library.

⁵² “Authoritative Teaching” in The Nag Hammadi Library.

The Proto-Orthodox on the other hand *wanted* to be known for their compassion for their bodies and their desire to care physically for others. Luke, for example, tells the tale of the Good Samaritan. While most readers remember only the parable itself, the context in which it appears plays an equally important role. In the story, as Jesus rejoices in the Holy Spirit and teaches his disciples about the Father and Son, a lawyer stands up to challenge him (Lk. 10:25-37). “Teacher,” he says “what must I do to inherit eternal life.” In response, Jesus asks him what the commandments say. “Love the Lord your God...and your neighbor as yourself.” “But who is my neighbor?” the man challenges again. Jesus replies with the tale of a man who was walking from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was waylaid by robbers, stripped bare, beaten, and left to die by the side of the road. As he laid there, several men, including a priest and a Levite, those whom the listener would expect to stop and assist the wounded man, merely cross to the other side of the road and pass him by. Only when a Samaritan, the most unlikely of heroes, sees the man, does he receive any aid. This Samaritan cleans and bandages the poor man’s wounds and brings him to an inn, informing the innkeeper that he will pay with his own coin to have the man properly tended to. The Samaritan, the man who showed mercy, is the true neighbor. “Go and do likewise” (Lk. 10:37) Jesus commands his listeners.

While many interpret the story of the Good Samaritan either ethically (helping others no matter who they are) or allegorically (describing the beaten man as the fall of mankind and the Samaritan as Jesus who forgave the sins of the world) it is also important to look at the events themselves within the story. The lawyer at the beginning asked how he could obtain the Kingdom of Heaven, and Jesus insisted the man must not only love God, but that he must also help those in need. He commanded Christians to

care for one another physically, even if the one in need of assistance be a Samaritan, who John later reminds the reader as people who “Jews do not share things in common with” (Jn. 4:9).

Just as Jesus commanded his listeners to follow the example of the Good Samaritan and love their neighbors as themselves, so too did he order his disciples to go forth into the world and “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, [and] cast out the demons” (Mt. 10:8). Following the death and resurrection of their savior, the disciples set out on their God-appointed missions, preaching the word of God and healing all those in need.

Thus, more than purity of soul and fullness of heart mattered to the Proto-Orthodox, as Christ their savior repeatedly restored the body to full health. Through his actions of feeding and healing thousands of men, women, and children, Jesus clearly understood the body as equal to the soul, and an essential aspect of full personhood. After his death this tradition became a hallmark of Catholic Christianity as believers began to gather around communion and to tend to the sick within their communities. Jesus commanded his followers to help those in need, and so they did, caring for the physical well-being of both themselves and their neighbors.

Chapter Two:

Born and Risen Bodies

When examining the life of Christ and the spread of Christianity throughout the ancient world, scholars rarely focus on the event of his birth. Birth, as they understand it, is a regular occurrence and therefore not of much significance. Yet in the Roman Empire birth would have constituted either a time of great joy or sorrow, and always contained great risk for both the mother and child. The simple fact that people as a whole *did* have to deal with birth every day does not downplay its significance, but in fact increases it. Instead of delving into this incredibly human occurrence, however, historians tend to focus on reincarnation and eternal life, a truly radical phenomenon which changed religion forever.⁵³ The resurrection of Christ, it seems, has been studied from every angle as scholars attempt to discern its doctrinal and societal significance. Some, like Carolyn Walker Bynum in her book The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336, examine resurrection metaphors in detail to discover how early Christians viewed the resurrection of their savior.⁵⁴ Others, like Elaine Pagels in her book The Gnostic Gospels, suggest that early Christians' insistence on the resurrection of Christ served a political function, as it validated their practice of apostolic succession.⁵⁵ While both of these topics aid in the understanding of how the Proto-Orthodox understood the resurrection itself, or how this group used this event to legitimize their

⁵³ Before Christianity, no religion had been able to preserve both body and spirit, and thus the complete person, in the afterlife. This point will be further discussed later on in this chapter.

⁵⁴ Carolyn Walker Bynum, The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 21-58

⁵⁵ Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels. (New York: Random House, 1979). 6-7

authority, such arguments lose sight of the body itself. Just as people are physically born into this world, so will they, according to the Proto-Orthodox, be reborn. Thus, the celebration of both incarnation and reincarnation reflected the values the early Christians themselves placed upon their earthly bodies.

The Proto-Orthodox believed that Jesus, their savior, was both physically born and then reborn as a flesh-and-blood human. These men and women would not have established a doctrine so central to their religion merely to establish their authority, nor would they have radically overturned centuries of religious beliefs simply because they could. Christ's birth and rebirth in physical form, therefore, clearly reflect the Proto-Orthodox's positive understanding of human bodies and embodiment. This chapter will thus explore how this understanding manifested itself, and how it helped the early Christians to define themselves against their religious competition in the ancient world.

Birth

When historians examine the life of ancient peoples, birth often falls to the wayside. Occasionally it is examined in terms of inheritance laws, in cases of infanticide, or to provide statistics, yet rarely in conjecture with the body. Birth, however, becomes a crucial aspect of study when reflecting on a society's understanding of the body, for without birth there would be no body at all. While this fact may seem quite obvious, it rarely receives the attention it deserves, for the manner in which people came into this world and their valuation (positive or negative) of that event profoundly influences their understanding of themselves.

In the lives of Jewish men and women, birth played such an important role that the first book in the Torah, "Genesis", literally means 'birth' and describes in detail a

myriad of births and the genealogy of the entire Jewish race. One story in particular tells of Abraham, who is nearly one hundred years old, and his equally ancient and barren wife, Sarah (Gen. 17-18, 20-21). Having chosen Abraham to be the father of all nations, God promises that Sarah will give birth to a son. In response to this news, both Sarah and Abraham laugh, not only at the notion that a couple as old as they could reproduce, but also in joy at the power of God and the prospect of children. Consequently, nearly a year later, Sarah gives birth to a son Isaac, meaning ‘laughter’ in Hebrew, further emphasizing their joy at this occasion. These men and women *wanted* to bring life into the world, and were in fact, commanded to do so.⁵⁶ If this religion viewed bodies in a negative light their God never would have cured women of their barrenness, nor would it have celebrated the birth of children, for, if bodies were evil, they would not want to bring more into the world.

Indeed, at this point the Jewish community viewed procreation as the pinnacle of human existence. When God talks to Abraham in Genesis, the essence of the blessing he gives is that Abraham will have a multitude of descendants and that he will literally be the father of an entire nation (Gen. 22:20-22). Parenthood is thus the greatest gift that God could bestow, not only on Abraham, but on the entire Jewish nation. Throughout the Torah, men and women pray to God to send them children because without them they are incomplete and even despised by their communities. The book of Genesis relates a story of a barren woman, Leah, who desperately prays for children, bemoaning the fact that even her community has cast her aside. Eventually, hearing her pleas, God opens her womb. Overcome with joy Leah cries out, “Because the Lord has heard that I am hated he has given me this son also” (Gen. 29:3). In fact, God saw fit to grant Leah several

⁵⁶ Gen. 1:28 God commanded man to “Be fruitful and multiply”

children, so that in the end she was well-loved by all.

Rachael, Leah's sister, saw her joy and was overcome with grief. Crying out in anguish to her husband Jacob she said, "Give me children or I shall die" (Gen. 30:1). Unable to bear children herself, she sent her maids to her husband to have children for her. So happy was she at the birth of her children that she named one of her sons Asher, meaning happiness (Gen. 30:13). Finally, at the time of the harvest God decided to cure Rachael of her barrenness, and she bore a son named Joseph. At his birth Rachael exclaimed, "God has taken away my reproach" (Gen. 30:22).⁵⁷ Because she was not able to provide her husband with children herself, Rachael was disgraced, yet God made her whole again through the birth of many sons.

Into this world where children were valued above all, Christianity was born. Like the Torah, three out of the four earliest accounts of the life of Jesus begin with creation stories. The Gospel of Matthew begins, "an account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham," firmly establishing Jesus in a long history of Jewish ancestry (Mt. 1:1). Not only does Matthew claim that Jesus is descended from the great King David, but also from Abraham, the father of the entire Jewish nation. He also immediately introduces Jesus as the Messiah, meaning 'anointed' in Hebrew, and thus the long-awaited answer to the Jewish prophecies. According to Isaiah and Jeremiah, the savior would be descended from King David, born from a virgin, and thus deliver the Jewish nation (Isa. 7:14; Jer. 23:5). Luke, while his genealogy differs from that of Matthew, also traces Jesus' lineage back to King David; he does not, however, then connect Jesus with Abraham, but instead creates a more universalizing savior by tracing his genealogy back to Adam, the original son of God. In this

⁵⁷ The New International Version reads "God has taken away my *disgrace*"

genealogy, Christ has descended to earth, not just to save the Jews, but all of humanity.

Yet not only does the Gospel of Luke provide the reader with the nativity of Jesus, but of John the Baptist as well. Luke describes how, several months apart, an angel descends both to Elizabeth and Zechariah and to Mary and Joseph to tell them that they will soon have a son who will be favored by the Lord. While both families receive the angel's news with apprehension (Zechariah in fact loses his ability to talk because he doubts the power of God), both women eventually express great joy. Because Mary is pregnant with Jesus at the same time that Elizabeth is pregnant with John, Mary goes to stay with Elizabeth for several months, not to commiserate with her, but to celebrate their pregnancies (Lk. 1:1-2:8). When they first meet, the baby in Elizabeth's womb even leaps for joy because he recognizes the Holy Spirit both in the unborn Jesus and Mary herself. Both women thus await their births together in joyous anticipation. Mary, in fact, overcome with love for God and the gift he has granted her, even bursts into song, singing praise to God and his mighty power (Lk. 1:46-56).

Shortly after Mary returns home, Elizabeth gives birth to John and exclaims, like her Jewish ancestors, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (Lk. 1:25). Without children Elizabeth had not fulfilled the true potential of her womanhood, and would have been seen as failing in her wifely duties. Society expected women to have children and looked down on them if they did not do so. For this reason women and men viewed children as a gift bestowed on them by God.

Several months later, as Luke tells his reader, Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem under the decree of Caesar and desperately sought shelter in a stable so that

Mary could give birth. Even in this crude and unadorned place happiness occurred in the form of a baby. Luke tells of shepherds flocking to gaze upon the child of God, while Matthew speaks of wise men bearing magnificent gifts (Lk. 2:8-20; Mt. 2:1-12). Amidst this spectacle the simple fact of Jesus' physical birth almost slips into the background. Yet the Gospels actually say "Mary gave birth" (Lk. 2:7; Mt. 1:25). While they could have easily ignored the event itself, they chose instead to explicitly raise it up. The fact that Jesus came into this world, not magically or as a mere illusion, but as a flesh-and-blood human being, becomes one of the crucial aspects of the Christian religion.

The Gospel of John speaks out strongly against the heretical idea that Christ was never physically born, and even elides incarnation with the creation of the world. Drawing upon his Jewish heritage, John echoes Genesis when he writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (Jn. 1:1-4).⁵⁸ For John, one of the purposes of this God was to bring physical life into reality, into being. Though Christ existed from the beginning of time as an aspect of God himself, he had only partially fulfilled his purpose as the medium through which the created world was brought into being. In order for him to complete his objective, Jesus assumed a human body. "The word became flesh" John writes, "and lived among [them]," bringing grace and truth into the world through Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God (Jn. 1:10-15). By sending his son fully embodied to earth, God brought both enlightenment and his own life into the world. For Jesus is God

⁵⁸ This passage echoes Genesis 1:1-4, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth... God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness." In both instances, creation is seen as good and one of the purposes of God.

incarnate and the means through which humankind will be reborn as children of God.

The Jesus of John's gospel, however, differs greatly from that of Matthew and especially Luke. Luke's Jesus was born completely human and only became divine once he had died and then been resurrected by God.⁵⁹ Yet, reflecting a shift from low to high Christology, John's Jesus is completely divine; in fact, he literally *is* God.⁶⁰ As the son of God, Christ is different from all other humans because he has the divine light within himself, where as everyone else must believe in him to find that saving light. Despite the fact that Jesus' soul was divine, however, his flesh was utterly and completely human. If God despised human bodies surely he would not have clothed his son in flesh. It must be assumed, therefore, that God loved the human body to such an extent that he thought it not only worthy of his son, but worthy to be created as the crucial aspect of his plan.

When defending Proto-Orthodox beliefs, one of the primary concerns for ancient apologists was the birth of their savior, for if this did not occur then the fabric of their religion would unravel. Ignatius, a student of Paul's thought and the third bishop of Antioch, wrote in a letter to the Trallians, "[Jesus] was the son of Mary, he was verily and indeed born... [and] apart from Him there is no true life for us."⁶¹ Perhaps the most detailed defense of Jesus' physical body is Tertullian's work "On the Flesh of Christ", written in the early 200's AD, which argues against the belief of an incorporeal Christ.⁶²

⁵⁹ Pagels, Beyond Belief, 44.

⁶⁰ Pagels, Beyond Belief, 37.

⁶¹ Ignatius, "Letter to the Trallians" in Early Christian Writings, (trans. Maxwell Straniforth. New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 81.

⁶² While Tertullian certainly does not speak for the whole tradition, outside the Old and New Testaments, ancient sources tend to be fairly quiet regarding the physical act of childbirth. Kathleen Rushton even states that "earliest Christian sources are silent on the observance of birth and menstrual purity regulations." (Kathleen P. Rushton, "The Woman in Childbirth in John 16:21: A Feminist Reading in (Pro)creative Boundary Crossing", in Wholly Woman Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity ed. Kristin De Troyer et al. (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 99. Several modern authors, however, postulate that some members of the Proto-Orthodox probably maintained the Jewish

This text more than any other describes in occasionally excruciating detail the physical birth of Christ. In particular, Tertullian attacks Marcion, a heretic, who believed that the flesh of Christ was merely an illusion, and thus that Christ was never born, for nativity cannot exist without flesh, nor flesh without nativity.⁶³

Living between 85 and 160 AD, Marcion preached the Gnostic idea of the ostensible birth of Christ because he believed in not one God, but two. Marcion envisioned the god of the Old Testament as the demiurge, the creature who fashioned the world of flesh and matter.⁶⁴ For centuries, because they were lost in the darkness, Jews had professed belief in this false and evil god who punished mankind for their sins without telling them how to overcome their vices. Yet looking down on this world, and feeling pity and compassion for the men and women in it, a second god, the god of the New Testament, sent his son Jesus Christ to earth to redeem humanity.⁶⁵ This god, Marcion argued, is the one true god, revealed to the world through Jesus. Yet because this god was not the creator god, Jesus could not have been fashioned into flesh, and thus could not have been literally born of Mary.

Tertullian takes Marcion to task for this belief, and argues that Marcion must assume that being born was either impossible for God, which is false since nothing is impossible for God, or unbecoming to him.⁶⁶ Since Marcion must assume the latter to be true, he must also believe babies to be disgusting. “This reverend course of nature, you, O Marcion, (are pleased to) spit upon;” Tertullian jabs, “and yet, in what way were you

belief that women were unclean following childbirth. Rushton, “The Woman in Childbirth in John 16:21: A Feminist Reading in (Pro)creative Boundary Crossing”, 88-89.

⁶³ Tertullian “On the Flesh of Christ” in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 3. Latin Christianity: Its Founder Tertullian. (ed. A. Cleveland Coxe. Reprint; 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989)

⁶⁴ E. C. Blackman, Marcion and his Influence. (New York: AMS Press, 1978), 48.

⁶⁵ Blackman, Marcion and his Influence, 66-67.

⁶⁶ Tertullian, “On the Flesh of Christ” in Ante-Nicene Fathers, ch. 3

born? You detest a human being at his birth; then after what fashion do you love anybody?”⁶⁷

For Christians are taught to love everyone, and loving everyone includes that which makes them human: their bodies and thus their birth. Does Marcion thus think himself better than Christ? For “Christ, at any rate,” Tertullian writes, “has loved even that person who was condensed in his mother’s womb, amidst all its uncleannesses, even that person who was brought into life out of said womb, even that person who was nursed amidst the nurse’s simpers”.⁶⁸ Tertullian almost revels in the filth and purposefully includes gory details both to make Marcion and his other readers cringe at his impropriety, and to prove that despite, or perhaps because of, the manner in which people begin life, God loves them. God has no doubts about how babies are born, and yet he still chooses for his son to come into the world in such a manner. It does not disgust him in the slightest, for Jesus came to redeem all humankind, blood, flesh, and all.

For this reason, Tertullian argues, women should not be shamed after giving birth, but honored.⁶⁹ In the Jewish world, the Law stated that after giving birth to a son a woman remained unclean and thus unfit to enter a holy place for thirty-three days, and after giving birth to a daughter, sixty-six (Lev. 12:4-5). Yet the Proto-Orthodox Christian religion rejected this idea completely. Tertullian insisted that, in God’s eyes, the woman is holy, not unclean or disgraceful; the woman is, in fact, herself a holy place. “In making this argument,” Jenifer A. Glancy writes in her book Corporeal Knowledge, “Tertullian has to contend with the Greco-Roman view that the bloody discharges of gestation and

⁶⁷ Tertullian “On the Flesh of Christ” in Ante-Nicene Fathers, ch. 4

⁶⁸ Tertullian “On the Flesh of Christ” in Ante-Nicene Fathers, ch. 4

⁶⁹ Tertullian “On the Flesh of Christ” in Ante-Nicene Fathers, ch. 4

childbirth are polluting and degrading....”⁷⁰ While Tertullian recognizes their filth, he also recognizes the love that God, and therefore he, must have for them. Indeed, the author of First Timothy even insists that childbirth will *save* women, not condemn them (1 Tim. 2:15).⁷¹ If the early Christians viewed flesh negatively they would not have celebrated its arrival into this world, nor would they have rejected both their Greek and Jewish roots to insist that even a woman’s body before, during, and after birth is itself a holy place.

The Gnostics, against whom many Christian apologists wrote, frequently maintained the opposite view of birth. Even though the Gnostics are frequently lumped together into a single group, in regard to their views on birth two separate and distinct sects clearly emerge. The first group, in many ways similar to the Proto-Orthodox, maintains that Jesus was truly born. Yet *no* Gnostic accounts of his birth exist. It is almost as though he magically appears on earth as a fully-grown man. When ancient Gnostic authors do mention Jesus’ nativity, they always do so with reference to him as the son of the blessed Virgin Mary and the Word of God, but they make no mention of the birth itself.⁷² They carefully distance themselves as much as possible from the actual birth of Christ because they do not hold the flesh in high esteem. In fact they never mention the flesh of Christ, or as stated in the previous chapter, anything he did with his body.

The second group of Gnostics insisted that the flesh of Jesus was merely an

⁷⁰ Jenifer A. Glancy. Corporeal Knowledge. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 117.

⁷¹ This letter was at first attributed to Paul, but recent scholarship rejects this, and instead groups First Timothy in the Pastoral Epistles with Second Timothy and Titus.

⁷² For ‘son of God’ see: “Sophia of Jesus Christ”, “Melchizedek”, “Trimorphic Protennoia”, “Gospel of Phillip”, “Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles”. For reference to the Jesus as the son of the Virgin Mary see: “Testimony of Truth”, “The Gospel of Philip” all in The Nag Hammadi Library.

illusion, and thus that his birth was an illusion as well. This belief stemmed from the Gnostic's hatred of all things physical, especially the body, as reflected in their cosmology. While all of the surviving accounts differ slightly, two creation myths emerge. In one creation myth the beginning there existed a pure and holy deity existed from which sprang many light beings, including Sophia and Jesus Christ.⁷³ Sophia, unhappy that only God could create, decided to bring forth for herself, and begot a monstrous creature, Yaldabaoth, who proceeded to create the world and the flesh of man. These corpses became animate when God was tricked into breathing light into them, causing the souls of men to become imprisoned in a body and consumed with sexual desire. From the sinful act of sex, children are begotten, fracturing the light into more bodies and making it even more difficult for the light to escape. Thus, to save the souls of men, God sent Christ to earth to remind them of their heavenly origin. Only those who possess this knowledge and live ascetic lives can return to the realm of the light.

In the other Gnostic creation myth, Sophia herself fell and became entrapped in the flesh, which had been created by evil beings. In this flesh Sophia prostituted herself and produced "dumb, blind and sickly" offspring, which were human beings.⁷⁴ Sophia herself, and thus the souls she created, must perceive their situation and repent in order to be saved from this sinful life. Though the two stories differ slightly, in both instances Evil created all things physical, including the body. The Gnostics clearly viewed the body as corrupting, as they understood it as attempting to blind them to the reality beyond and chain them instead to the physical realm. Their savior, therefore, would not have

⁷³ For example, see "The Apocryphon of John" in [The Nag Hammadi Library](#).

⁷⁴ "The Exegesis of the Soul" in [The Nag Hammadi Library](#). See also "The Sophia of Jesus Christ" in [The Nag Hammadi Library](#).

deigned to be clothed in something so base. Instead, he appeared to the select few only as an illusion to illuminate their minds and free their souls from their earthly bondage.

Yet knowledge alone was not enough. The body presented a strong foe and had to be controlled by severe asceticism.⁷⁵ Not only did the Gnostics fast, but they also condemned all sexual activity. The pleasure of sex not only kept the mind fixed on worldly appetites, but also resulted in children. These men and women abhorred the way in which a child came into this world (for nothing good could result from such filth and gore) and also believed that having a baby splintered the light yet again and condemned another soul imprisonment in the flesh.

Early Christians strongly opposed Gnostic beliefs and practices. Instead of insisting that evil created men, they believed that “God created humankind in his image” (Gen. 1:27). Thus to hate oneself and subsequently one’s body was to hate God. God was not so cruel as to force people to live their lives in something he himself despised, and certainly would not have clothed his son with a body if he found it degrading in any way. Consequently, the author of Second Clement, perhaps echoing the words of Paul, writes “In what state did you regain your sight, if it was not in this flesh? Therefore you should guard this flesh as God’s temple.”⁷⁶ By making the body God’s temple, the author has made it one of the holiest places on earth. Not only will one worship and profess his/her love for God here, but God himself will reside in the body. The author of Second Clement goes on to explain that the body is the anti-type of the spirit, and whoever has corrupted this will not share in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, above all, people should love

⁷⁵ “Testimony of Truth” in The Nag Hammadi Library

⁷⁶ “Second Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians” In After the New Testament: Reader in Early Christianity (ed. Bart D. Ehrman, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 355-56. Historians have come to realize that this is actually a sermon written between 140-160 AD by an unknown man. Also, see 1 Cor. 6:19 “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit..?”

and honor their bodies in anticipation of the world to come.⁷⁷ They must, in the words of Paul “glorify God in (their) bod[ies]” (1 Cor. 6:18-21).

Because the Proto-Orthodox believed that their bodies were a place of worship and the dwelling place of God, sexual purity became extremely important to them. Several early Christian writers beginning with Paul urged budding Christians to either remain a virgin or to practice abstinence (1 Cor. 5:9-13). Many scholars, reading through the ascetic lens of later Christianity, tend to regard abstinence as a form of bodily punishment which denies the body of sexual pleasure it desires. The early Proto-Orthodox however did not hold such a view. In fact, they actively spoke out against this Gnostic practice. Instead, they practiced abstinence out of *respect* for their bodies. They valued them to such an extent that they wanted to maintain their purity and goodness, not punish them for their wrong-doing.⁷⁸

At the same time, however, they did not regard all sex as a sin. Because the followers of Jesus, especially those living around the same time as Jesus, ardently believed that the end of the world would arrive any day they urged converts to remain celibate (1 Cor 7:25). As time wore on and the end did not come, Christian communities had to figure out how to exist in this world while they waited, not quite so patiently, for the next. Thus, simply because of the nature of human beings, sexual abstinence could not be maintained by all. The early church fathers therefore had a choice: either to condemn all of those who could not maintain their sexual purity, or to institutionalize

⁷⁷ “Second Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians” In After the New Testament: Reader in Early Christianity, 367

⁷⁸ The Gnostics practiced abstinence because they believed that sexual urges, and especially the act of sex itself, enslaved the mind to the carnal urges of the body and blinded them to the light of truth. Abstinence, therefore, was a punishment for their body, denying it its base desires. Proto-Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, practiced abstinence out of love for their bodies. They believed that sex outside marriage not only corrupted the soul, but the body itself (1 Cor. 6:18). This point will be further explored on pg. 48.

specific cases in which sex was acceptable. The early Christians, therefore, urged their followers to marry. Within marriage, sex was expected and even encouraged. Paul, for example, in his first letter to the Corinthians, writes that everyone should marry and not deprive each other of sex (1 Cor. 7:1-16). Sex within marriage therefore did not corrupt, and was to be enjoyed by both partners.

Occasionally, some early Christians insisted that sex, even within marriage, should only be done for the purpose of children. While this may seem to condemn the act itself as somehow corrupting or polluting if it should only be done in certain instances, it is important to notice that it is still performed for the sake of producing children. Children mean more bodies, but in this instance more bodies to love and share in the glory of God, not to splinter the light and become even further removed from God. Also, the context of such a statement proves crucial to its meaning. Athenagoras, for example, in his “Plea Regarding the Christians” addressed to Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antonius and Lucius Aurelius Commodus in 177 AD, writes “according to our [Christian] laws, each of [us] thinks of the woman he has married as his wife only for the purpose of bearing children.”⁷⁹ This document, however, is not a letter to a community or a collection of early Christian laws, but a defense of Christian traditions and practices. In this section in particular, Athenagoras responds to the criticism of the immortality of Christians. Because he would want to present his people and his religion in the best light possible, he would over-exaggerate their purity to prove that their marriages, far from being immoral, are even holier than those of pagans. In reality, all Christians probably did not only view their spouse only as a means for begetting an heir. But to portray it as

⁷⁹ Athenagoras, “Plea Regarding the Christians” in After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity, 70

such served Athenagoras' needs and further proved his point. Such a statement should therefore not be viewed as the norm, nor understood as containing contempt for the body or its desires.

Similarly, when early Christians did condemn sex, the context in which their denunciations occurred cannot be extracted from their meaning. The writings of Paul, which can become conflicting and convoluted, especially become victims of this selective reading. While it is easy to quote Paul saying, "Shun fornication!" (1 Cor. 6:18) as an argument for his hatred of the body, the reader loses the context which in fact contradicts this argument altogether. The rest of the passage reads, "Every sin that a person commits is outside the body, but the fornicator sins *against the body itself*" (1 Cor. 6:18).⁸⁰ Thus, far from hating the body, Paul respects it, and urges his readers and their congregations to do the same. In this instance, the sin of fornication does not harm the soul, as it does in Gnostic discourse, but the body. The purity of the body clearly poses an enormous concern for Paul and early Christians, and they therefore love, respect, and provide for its wellbeing. Also, when one reads on further, another important distinction arises. Here, Paul does not condemn all sex as a sin against the body, but only that which he defines as fornication, that is, sex performed outside of marriage. When performed outside this sacred institution, all sex is bad; yet inside, it is perfectly acceptable. Paul and many other Christian writers maintain these sentiments, urging Christians to marry to save not only their souls but their bodies as well, if they are not able to remain virgins.

Rebirth

Because one is physically born, one must physically die; on this point all religions agree. The distinguishing factor between these religions, however, is their view on what

⁸⁰ Italics are my own

occurs upon death, and what, if anything, follows. In the Judaic tradition, the Psalms refer to death as “silence”, the “pit,” “soil” and even “sleep.”⁸¹ In his essay on death and the afterlife in the Psalms, John Goldingay, paraphrasing Psalm 104:29, says, “when someone dies, their body becomes lifeless and incapable of activity, though it does not cease to exist. Yahweh who gave their breath now takes it away.”⁸² Essentially the man or woman ceases to be a person anymore since the two parts of their personhood have become separated and consequently useless. Despite the reference to Yahweh taking their breath away, the breath does not appear to remain animate or retain any sense of self once it has been separated from the body. No literary references are made to the soul remaining entity after the person has died. In fact, there are very few references to life after death in the Torah at all.⁸³ Subsequently, Yahweh appears as the only immortal being in Jewish discourse. In the Jewish mindset, man was not supposed to live forever, but instead live only once and then perish as was the natural course of life.

Similar to the Judaic religion, Pagan cultures believed that when a person died, his or her body and soul separated, thus rendering him or her an incomplete human being.⁸⁴ The Greeks maintained a deep dislike for the corpse itself. Understanding it as a pollutant, they even buried their dead outside the city walls so as not to infect the city.

Thus, when the soul departed from the body, attendance to and proper burial of the body

⁸¹ Goldingay, “Death and Afterlife in the Psalms” in Judaism in Late Antiquity (ed. Alan J. Avery-Peck and Jacob Neusner, Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2000), 62.

⁸² Goldingay, “Death and Afterlife in the Psalms” in Judaism in Late Antiquity, 62. The Hebrew word “Nefesh” means “breath”, “spirit” or “life”. Thus, when Yahweh takes people’s breath away he takes away their spirit or life force. Similarly, in Genesis 2:17 God breaths “the breath of life” into Adam’s nostrils, and makes him a living being.

⁸³ Goldingay, “Death and Afterlife in the Psalms” in Judaism in Late Antiquity. 35. While many Christians today point to Psalm 23:6 as evidence of heaven in the Old Testament, Robert Alter, a prominent Jewish scholar, argues against this reading. He translates the psalm as “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long days”, meaning his born days, the days of his human life. Robert Alter, The Book of Psalms. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 80.

⁸⁴ Dag Øistein Endsjø, Greek Resurrection Beliefs and the Success of Christianity. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 24, 29

were essential to the existence of the soul, for the condition in which a person died carried over into the afterlife. The soul would, in fact, reflect the physical features of the body, even the wounds which were inflicted on it upon death.⁸⁵ The destruction of the body before obsequies could be performed could even eliminate the possibility of a post-mortal existence all together. This port-mortal existence was not, however, a new life. The Greeks did not view their souls as immortal because they were not alive. Because a person existed as a psychosomatic unit, he or she did not exist fully without both aspects of him or her self. Even a hero, like Achilles, who obtained paradise, died and was not reborn. These souls literally became shades or shadows of their former selves.⁸⁶

Again, like in the Judaic tradition, only Gods achieved immortality. While Gods had both a body and soul, Pagans viewed these bodies as non-human because they did not decay. Although the god's physical form was repeatedly stressed, another decidedly non-human aspect of their flesh was that the gods could change their appearance at will.⁸⁷ Yet even this religion, with its insistence on proper treatment of the body through obsequies and tales of souls existing in human shapes after their death, could not reunite the body with the soul. "No Greek," Dag Øistein Endsjø writes, "from Homeric times to the Christian era could to anything to preserve that psychosomatic unity human were considered to be."⁸⁸

Early Christianity, however, changed religious thinking about death forever. The Proto-Orthodox Christians, like all other religious practitioners of the day, believed that because Jesus was born, so he must necessarily die. And so he did on the day when Judas

⁸⁵ Dag Øistein Endsjø, Greek Resurrection Beliefs and the Success of Christianity. 31

⁸⁶ Dag Øistein Endsjø, Greek Resurrection Beliefs and the Success of Christianity. 36

⁸⁷ Dag Øistein Endsjø, Greek Resurrection Beliefs and the Success of Christianity. 42

⁸⁸ Dag Øistein Endsjø, Greek Resurrection Beliefs and the Success of Christianity. 38

betrayed him and he was crucified. The early Christian apologists repeatedly stressed the humanness of Jesus' death, especially his ability to feel pain. Once again refuting the Gnostic notion of an immaterial Christ, they insisted that Jesus' death physically occurred. "After all," Ignatius writes in his letter to the Smyrnaeans as he was led to his martyrdom between 98 and 117 AD, "if everything our Lord did was only an illusion, then these chains of mine must be an illusion too!"⁸⁹ For as Proto-Orthodox writers knew, death was not the end as the body and soul would soon rise again.

After three days time when Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, Salome and other women returned to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body with spices, they discovered, to their astonishment, that Jesus' body has disappeared (Mark 16:1-8). In its place stood two men clothed in white robes. These men greeted the women and informed them that they should not be afraid, for the Son of Man had risen again. The women rushed from the tomb and told the disciples the good news. As the disciples discussed among themselves what had happened and wondered whether or not to believe the women, Jesus appeared among them. Instead of greeting him, the disciples were terrified and thought that they saw a ghost. But Jesus said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that I am myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have" (Lk. 24:1-49). The disciples were astounded and received Jesus joyfully.

The Gospel of John tells of a similar event in which Thomas, a disciple of Jesus, did not believe that Jesus had risen in the flesh from the dead (Jn. 20:24-29). This story, and in fact much of the Gospel itself, acts not only as an anti-Gnostic polemic, but against a specific Gnostic text. The Gnostic "Gospel of Thomas," written slightly before the

⁸⁹ Ignatius, "Letter to the Smyrnaeans" in Early Christian Writings, 102.

Gospel of John, shares a great deal in common with John's gospel, as both contain secret sayings of Jesus and both identify Christ with the primordial light which eventually came into being as God's only begotten son.⁹⁰ John, however, frequently denounces Thomas's beliefs throughout his gospel especially in regard to the saving grace of Christ. Unlike the Gnostic assertion that the light of God lives in everyone and that in order to achieve salvation people need only look inside themselves, John insists that only Christ contains the light of God because he *is* God, and therefore people will only be saved for their belief in him.⁹¹ This point, in fact, comes to a head at the end of John's gospel, when Thomas doubts that Jesus has arisen bodily from the dead. John proceeds to make a fool out of this Gnostic non-believer by having Jesus scold him, commanding him to touch the wounds on his hands where the nails held him to the cross and the wound on his side where the sentry pierced him with a spear (Jn. 20:24-29). Suddenly, Thomas sees and believes, not because he found the knowledge within himself, but because he recognizes Jesus as the Son of God, and the Light of the World. John closes his gospel triumphantly, having disproven the beliefs of the Gnostics, and having converted Thomas himself to the true Christian religion.

Therefore, as Jesus clearly demonstrated to even the most doubtful of critics, he had defeated death by being born again. The Proto-Orthodox believed that the flesh in which Christ returned to earth was changed, in that it was now cloaked in immortality and thus impervious to decay, but otherwise no different than their own.⁹² Jesus had returned to them as he was in life: a whole and complete person, comprised both of body

⁹⁰ Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, 40.

⁹¹ Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, 65-68.

⁹² Lk. 24:39 "see that I am *myself*" (italics are my own). For a full discussion on the nature of the flesh of resurrected Jesus, see Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 21-51.

and soul. The Proto-Orthodox and their savior loved their bodies to such an extent and understood them to be an essential aspect of their psychophysical selfhood, that they chose to save their bodies from death as well, going above and beyond all other religions of their day by maintaining full personhood in the afterlife.

Yet while these men and women insisted that they would eventually be resurrected, so too did they know that when they died they would, for a time, cease to exist. Justin Martyr, in his dialogue with Trypho, wrote, “a man does not live forever, and his body is not forever united with his soul, since, when this union must be discontinued, the soul leaves the body and the man no longer exists.”⁹³ At this point, Christians did not believe that, upon death, the soul ascends to heaven to reside with God; instead, when this person died, his or her two halves became disconnected. Not even the coming of Jesus could prevent death entirely, nor was it supposed to. Unlike in Judaism and Paganism, however, death was not a permanent state. Instead, this new sect of Christians began to believe that on the Judgment Day, when Jesus would once again descend to earth to judge all people, both the body and the soul would be reunited and await their destiny together. For those who doubted this occurrence the author of Second Clement wrote, “Moreover, let none of you say that his flesh will not be judged or rise again.... For just as you were called in the flesh, you will come in the flesh.”⁹⁴

Once this person has been judged, he or she will either be rewarded with paradise or punished eternally. Many early Christians wrote about the torture people would endure should they act wrongly and not believe. Most speak of fire and other atrocities which would torment the body, yet hell did not aim to punish the body alone, for the soul

⁹³ Justin Martyr “Dialogue with Trypho” in Writings of Saint Justin Martyr. (ed. Thomas B. Falls, New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.) 156.

⁹⁴ 2 Clem. In After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity. 365-366.

would be present as well (Mk. 9:42-48). Nor do these people receive such punishment only because of the sins of the flesh, for as Jesus exhorts his audience, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come from outside are what defile” (Mk. 7:15). One can just as easily be condemned for lying, deceitfulness, envy, pride, or folly. Jesus even insists that sins such as fornication and adultery come from within the human heart, not the body (Mk 7:20-22). Not only this but some crimes for which the person could be punished are due solely to incorrect beliefs. The Gnostics, for example, practiced severe bodily purity, carefully monitoring what they consumed and refraining from sex entirely. Yet because they did not believe that Christ had physically died and subsequently physically rose again, they would not receive paradise.

Indeed, unlike many present day Christians who believe that only their soul rises to heaven, the Proto-Orthodox believed that their body would be eternally rewarded as well. If bodies had done God’s work in life and lived by God’s laws, should they not be rewarded equally alongside souls? The Proto-Orthodox viewed their bodies as God’s temples, pure, holy, and good. “If Christ our Lord who saved us was made flesh though he first was spirit, and called us in this way,” the author of Second Clement writes, “in the same way too in this very flesh will we receive our reward.”⁹⁵ If the early Christians truly hated the body they would have neither resurrected nor rewarded them. They could have easily taken the pagan beliefs only a step further and added a pleasant place for the faithful souls to reside when a person died; yet they went above and beyond even the imagination of other religions and reunited the body and soul to save the entire person from death.

⁹⁵ 2 Clem. in After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity, 366.

The Proto-Orthodox also could have adopted the Gnostic belief that Jesus returned to this world only as an illusion.⁹⁶ The Gnostics insisted that Jesus was not born again in the flesh because they believed that *all* flesh must eventually decay and die. Because this group believed that knowledge alone saved them, and that upon death their souls would ascend to be with God, there was no need for Christ to return physically. They hated the body and could not wait for the day when they would finally be released from it to leave it to rot, thus returning it to the evil forces from whence it came.

Instead of adopting this belief, the Proto-Orthodox actively defined themselves against the Gnostics, firmly arguing for the importance of a psychophysical self and its resurrection in Christ. They loved their bodies and thus believed their savior came to save them in such a way. Truly, Jesus was born amidst such filth, truly he died in blood and pain and truly he rose again, assuming flesh, signaling his defeat of death and sin. He loved bodies in all of their beauty and their filth and thus allowed all man kind to retain their bodies for eternity.

⁹⁶ Bynum, The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336. 26.

Chapter Three:

Witnessing Bodies

Over the years, the study of martyrdom has been approached in a myriad of ways as historians seek to understand the phenomenon. Some examine the soldier and athlete images in martyr narratives, others closely investigate the trials and the Roman Empire's justification for Christian deaths, and yet others ask why martyrdom occurred and how it helped to spread the Christian religion.⁹⁷ While all of these courses of study add depth and value to our understanding of martyrdom, the physicality and bodily significance of the act itself has gotten lost. Martyrs did not offer their souls as witnesses to God, but their bodies; and through their bodies God worked great miracles. Not only did they witness the power of God by relating to Christ through their bodily suffering and deaths, but they also bore witness to God's love as their very bodies became holy and a vessel of his power. The treatment and conceptualization of the martyrs' bodies thus reveal the love and respect both the Proto-Orthodox and their God held for bodies themselves.

Today, the word "martyr" means one who has died for his or her belief in God. While the word martyr did come to embody this meaning, the word itself originates from the Greek and eventually Latinized word *martus* meaning "witness", especially in a legal sense.⁹⁸ Specifically, the first martyrs in ancient Christianity believed themselves to

⁹⁷ See for example G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence*.

⁹⁸ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*. 5. The legal meaning of this word eventually slipped away so that the word "martyr" began to mean in ancient Latin more what it means today.

be witnesses to Christ's passion.⁹⁹ Christ, they believed, had endured great suffering on the cross, made evident through the visible wounds his body bore upon his resurrection (Jn. 20:27). It was this bodily suffering which many Proto-Orthodox Christians yearned to imitate when faced with persecution and death from the Pagan community. Ignatius of Antioch, an early second-century martyr, wrote prolifically about his overwhelming desire to share in Christ's passion, as he urged the Magnesians, Romans and Symerians to "leave me to imitate the passion of my God."¹⁰⁰ If Christ had suffered for their sake, then the early Christians believed that they should suffer for his. The "Didascalía," written in the early third century AD and clearly modeled on the earlier "Didache," asked its readers, "If then He suffered for our sake, to redeem us who believe in Him, and was not ashamed, why do we not also imitate His suffering?"¹⁰¹

Many men and women subsequently longed for their bodies to bear witness to God through the tortures they received in the name of Christ, just as Christ had done for them. Sanctus, one of the martyrs of Lyons who died in 177 A.D., achieved just that at the hands of his Roman captors. "His body was a witness [martus] of his sufferings," his biographer writes, "the whole body being a wound and a bruise...."¹⁰² Bodies themselves, not souls, witnessed Christ's passion as they too bore signs of mutilation. Martyrs did not seek to preach the teachings of Christ, but to act as he did, to relate to him through his bodily suffering. And so each martyr yearned for and received physically

⁹⁹ Everet Furgeson Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries, trans. Maxwell Straniforth. (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 212.

¹⁰⁰ Ignatius, "Letter to the Romans" in Early Christian Writings, (trans. Maxwell Straniforth. New York: Penguin Books, 1968) 87. See also Ignatius, "Letter to the Symerians" in Early Christian Writings, 102, which states: "But it is only in the name of Jesus Christ, and for the sake of sharing His sufferings, that I could face all this"; and Ignatius, "Letter to the Magnesians" in Early Christian Writings, 71; Which states: "Unless we are ready and willing to die in conformity with His passion, His life is not in us now".

¹⁰¹ "Didascalía" in Everet Furgeson, Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries , 204.

¹⁰² Eusebius, "The Persecution and Martyrdoms of Lyons in 177 A.D." ch.4 in History of the Church.

violent deaths: the Martyrs of Lyons were devoured by beasts, Ignatius was burned and eventually stabbed, and the blessed Perpetua was fed to wild animals and finally helped a soldier to slit her own throat.¹⁰³

While many martyrs literally yearned to suffer physically like their savior, others understandably feared it. As Bart Ehrman correctly observes “one person’s pathology... is another person’s common sense.”¹⁰⁴ Because of this fear, biographers of martyrs and other Christians who had witnessed these horrific deaths began to preach that the martyr could not actually feel physical pain because God and Christ were present with him or her during the ordeal. The narrator of the second-century “Martyrdom of Polycarp,” for example, wrote vividly about the terrifying physical death of martyrs, “seeing that when they were so torn by lashes that the mechanism of their flesh was visible even as far as the inward veins and arteries, they endured patiently, so that the very bystanders had pity and wept.”¹⁰⁵ Under any other circumstances, the men who suffered these blows would cry out in pain, yet “while they themselves reached such a pitch of bravery that none of them uttered a cry or a groan, thus showing to us all that at that hour the martyrs of Christ being tortured were absent from the flesh, or rather that the Lord was standing by and conversing with them.”¹⁰⁶ The Lord stood with the martyrs *in the flesh*, having pity on them and releasing them from bodily suffering. Often, Proto-Orthodox writers asserted that because the martyr became so absorbed in the Lord, he or she did even not realize what terrible mutilation he or she had undergone. The biographer of Perpetua, for

¹⁰³ Eusebius, “The Persecution and Martyrdoms of Lyons in 177 A.D.” ch. 6 ; Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson trans., “The Martyrdom of Ignatius” in Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1 Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Cox. (Grand Rapids: WM B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989); W.H. Shewring, trans. The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity. (London: 1931)

¹⁰⁴ William Farina. Perpetua of Carthage: Portrait of a Third-Century Martyr. (Jefferson:McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009) 57.

¹⁰⁵ Maxwell Staniforth trans. “The Martyrdom of Polycarp” ch. 2 in Early Christian Writings,

¹⁰⁶ Staniforth, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp”ch. 2 in Early Christian Writings

example, depicts a horrifying scene in which a cow mauls Perpetua. Yet, according to her biographer, she did not realize that this had occurred until, astonished, she looked down at her body and “perceived some of the marks of the mauling on her body and on her dress.”¹⁰⁷ Christians thus began to believe that Christ cared for these men and women to such an extent that he allowed them to display physical signs of their suffering for Christ without actually feeling the bodily pain.

Occasionally, Christ also demonstrated his power through the bodies of martyrs by rejuvenating their torn up flesh or by extending the life of the martyr far past its usual breaking point. After being cruelly tortured and then locked in a filthy, cold, damp prison cell, Sanctus, Eusebius tells the reader, finally looked as though he could not survive another moment longer. Delighted, his captors hoped that through one more session of torture he would finally die. “Yet not only did no such thing happen to him” the author writes, “but even, contrary to every human exception, his body unbent itself. It became erect during the subsequent tortures and resumed its former appearance and the use of the limbs. The second torture turned out through the grace of Christ as a cure, not an affliction.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the author of the “Martyrs of Lyons” describes Blandina’s whole body as being torn and opened up by her torturers who tried every possible way to break her. Yet, because Christ stood with her and gave strength to her body, they did not prevail and had to give up, being too “wearied and tired” to continue.¹⁰⁹

This miraculous survival occurred not only behind the closed doors of prison cells, but also in the public arena. The Romans sentenced Polycarp to death by fire in 155 A.D. for refusing to sacrifice to the Roman Gods. Instead of his flesh burning and

¹⁰⁷ Shewring, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*

¹⁰⁸ Eusebius, “The Persecution and Martyrdoms of Lyons in 177 A.D.” ch. 4

¹⁰⁹ Eusebius, “The Persecution and Martyrdoms of Lyons in 177 A.D.” ch.3

turning to ash, his body became more beautiful because of the fire, like “[a loaf in the oven or like] gold and silver refined in a furnace”.¹¹⁰ So too did his body emit a smell of “frankincense or some other precious spice” instead of the putrid smell of burning flesh.¹¹¹ Eventually, seeing that the fire could not consume his body, the executioner approached Ignatius and stabbed him with a dagger.¹¹² The Christian spectators of the event and subsequent readers of this account thus believed that God showed himself through the preservation and endurance of these bodies. If Christians believed that their God chose to demonstrate his power through the body and use it to stand up against Rome to strengthen the resolve of his people and the Christian religion, then he must therefore love and value the body because it helped to carry out his divine plans. He would not have chosen an object he hated or felt indifferent towards to display his glory.

Biographers of martyrs thus became fascinated with the body because they believed that through it, Christ worked great wonders. Because the martyrs themselves could not write firsthand accounts of deaths, the authors of their tales were at liberty to embellish upon the facts to fit their purpose for writing. These authors were, after all, glorifying death to convert Pagans and Jews to Christianity, and to encourage other Christians who faced the similar possibility of execution under the Roman Empire. While people today may doubt the veracity of the statements, insisting that these men and women must have felt pain during their terrible physical torture, the fact that the Proto-Orthodox believed that they did not is crucial for understanding their perception of their

¹¹⁰ Staniforth, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp” ch. 15 in Early Christian Writings.

¹¹¹ The smells emitted by Polycarp in fact were signs of his sanctity and his successful sacrifice to the Lord. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 5.

¹¹² Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson trans., “The Martyrdom of Ignatius” in Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1

own bodies. If God loved bodies enough to release them from pain, then so too would his followers love their own bodies.

Despite the Proto-Orthodox's clear understanding of their bodies as a positive aspect of themselves, many historians stubbornly continue to insist that these men and women disliked their bodies and subsequently viewed martyrdom ascetically. Everett Ferguson even goes so far as to call martyrdom the "ultimate expression of self-denial."¹¹³ While martyrs did uniformly look forward to the next life, they did not hate the one which they were leaving behind. In his book Perpetua of Carthage, William Farina, though inadvertently, make this case in point. Specifically, he closely examines Perpetua's quote, "Deo gratias, ut quomodo in carne hilaris fui, hilarior sim et iam modo."¹¹⁴ Alban Butler, writing in the 18th century, translated the passage as "God be praised, I have more joy here than I ever had in the flesh." While Farina rightly attributes this slightly flawed reading to the subtlety of Latin and the difficulty of translation, so too may Butler have translated the quote to suit his belief in ancient Christians' negative understanding of their bodies. This translation suggests that Perpetua is happier now than she ever was, which is true; yet it is phrased in such a manner, ignoring the structure of the Latin, which construes Perpetua as *never* having felt any joy in her life on earth. When reexamined, however, as numerous scholars have discovered, this could not be further from the truth. My own translation reads much like Farina's and many others, "Thanks be to God, just as I was joyful in the flesh, I am even more joyful now." Rendered in this fashion, Perpetua expresses her love of life *in the flesh*. The fact that she is more joyful because she will soon be in heaven with God does not detract from her

¹¹³ Everett Ferguson, Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries, Vol. 2. 251.

¹¹⁴ William Farina, Perpetua of Carthage: Portrait of a Third Century Martyr, 121.

joy in her human life. She does not reject her body, nor seek to rid herself of a corrupting flesh, but instead seeks the next life in which she will still be embodied.

Also, for Ferguson to insist that martyrdom was ascetic and therefore a denial of the body, is to suggest sinful feelings within the body itself. When an ascetic fasts or practices abstinence, he or she denies the body its gluttonous desire for food or its lustful longing for sex. Thus martyrdom as an ascetic act would suggest that the practitioner denies the body its wrongful yearning for life. This suggestion, however, ignores and even subverts all beliefs central to the Proto-Orthodox. As discussed above, Paul and the other Apostolic fathers viewed the body as a temple for God, as a sacred object which God created and within which both God and God's son resided. The martyrs too shared the sentiment, as Ignatius himself wrote to the Ephesians in the months preceding in his own death, "Whatever we do, then, let it be done as though [God] Himself were dwelling within us, we being as it were His temples and He within us as their God. For, in fact, that is literally the case."¹¹⁵ Christians would not seek to rid themselves of that which belonged to God, for to do so would be to reject God himself. Nor did these men and women view martyrdom as a defilement of their bodies, as to do so would result in the loss of the Kingdom of God.¹¹⁶ Their goal, therefore, must have been the opposite: to offer up their bodies as a sacred and holy sacrifice for their Lord.

As a sacrifice, these men and women did not defile their bodies, but sanctified them by deeming them worthy of God. "This one favor I beg of you," Ignatius wrote to a Christian community at Rome, "suffer me to be a libation poured out to God, while there

¹¹⁵ Ignatius, "Letter to the Ephesians" in Early Christian Writings, 65

¹¹⁶ Ignatius, "Letter to the Ephesians" in Early Christian Writings, 65

is still an altar ready for me.”¹¹⁷ Just as Jesus sacrificed himself for the good of humanity, so too did martyrs sacrifice themselves for their brethren. For indeed, Jesus himself was the Lamb of God, the sacrificial animal brought to slaughter so that the rest of humanity may live (Jn. 1:29). Mark even emphasizes that the night of Jesus’ betrayal fell upon the “first day of unleavened bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed” (Mk. 14:12). Thus, like Christ, the martyrs and the Proto-Orthodox emphasized that there was no greater sacrifice to be offered than their bodies and their mortal lives. For to sacrifice one’s body was not to deny but embrace it and thus bless it in the name of God.

Not even the Gnostics, who practiced asceticism, viewed martyrdom as an act of self-denial. The majority of Gnostics strongly disliked the idea and, for the most part, avoided dying for Christ. Why would anyone, they asked themselves, endure bodily suffering if he or she was going to leave the body behind upon their death?¹¹⁸ This, more than anything else, proves that no contemporary writers on martyrdom, even self-proclaimed ascetics, believed that martyrdom fell into this category. Gnostics also rejected the Proto-Orthodox love of martyrdom for a myriad of different reasons. The notion of being a sacrifice to God horrified and disgusted the Gnostics who seemed to have retained the Roman understanding of sacrifice. In Pagan religions one sacrificed the juiciest and most succulent pieces of meat to the Gods who lived off the fumes which wafted up to their abode on Mount Olympus. If a human, therefore, was sacrificed to the Gods, the Gods themselves would become cannibals, an abominable notion to the Gnostics. Their God, unlike those of the Romans, desired *no* flesh, not even that of

¹¹⁷ Ignatius, “Letter to the Romans” in Early Christian Writings, 85-86

¹¹⁸ Salisbury, The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence, 37.

animals, so to offer God human flesh was an unthinkable and inexcusable crime.¹¹⁹

Also, the Gnostics disliked the Proto-Orthodox insistence that through suffering and confession they could essentially purchase eternal life.¹²⁰ The Gnostic author of the “Testimony of Truth” writes, “Foolish people have it in their minds that if they simply make the confession, ‘We are Christians,’ in words but not with power, and ignorantly give themselves up to human death, they will live. But they are in error and do not know where they are going or who Christ really is....”¹²¹ Death, they argue, proves nothing, only ignorance. Since Christ never suffered on the cross because he was never actually human, to imitate his death would be pointless.¹²² Humans alone felt pain and agony, not God, and thus any attempt to relate to such a being on a physical level was futile and foolish. A true follower of Christ, the Gnostics would argue, knows that it is not death but knowledge will bring him or her life, for “[those who will receive] him to themselves [with uprightness] and [power] and every knowledge [are the ones whom] he will bring [to] heave, to eternal [life].”¹²³ Christians therefore are born again in the Word, not in the flesh, and therefore so must they live according to their minds and not their bodies. Sacrifice meant nothing to the Gnostic god, and Gnostics scorned all those who believed otherwise.

The Proto-Orthodox, however, as Bert Ehrman observes, “considered this willingness to die for the faith one of the hallmarks of the religion, and in fact, used it as a boundary marker, separating true believers... from false heretics they were so

¹¹⁹ Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels. (New York: Random House, 1979), 92. See also, Salisbury, The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence, 37.

¹²⁰ Salisbury, The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence, 37.

¹²¹ “Testimony of Truth” in The Nag Hammadi Scriptures, edited by Marvin Meyer. (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 618 .

¹²² Salisbury, The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence, 37.

¹²³ “Testimony of Truth” in The Nag Hammadi Scriptures, 619.

concerned about....”¹²⁴ Thus, the Proto-Orthodox denounced the false beliefs of the Gnostics, and frequently spoke out against them. Ignatius even calls the Gnostics atheists for suggesting that Christ never actually suffered and died.¹²⁵ At this point, suffering had become synonymous with salvation and, as many asserted, it was bettered to endure fire for an hour than the pits of hell for all eternity.

Early Christians also believed that when a person was martyred all of the sins (not only those of the soul, but of the flesh as well) that he or she had committed in his or her lifetime were forgiven.¹²⁶ Having been washed free of all transgressions committed in life, upon their deaths these men and women would automatically receive heaven. This does not mean that the soul immediately left the body to reside with God. At this time the Proto-Orthodox believed that only on Judgment Day would the body and soul rise again to exist as a complete person forever more.¹²⁷ If one does not remember this when examining the deaths of martyrs, then their deaths hold little significance. Martyrs did not cast off the body, because they would regain it in heaven. “I bless Thee”, Polycarp wrote, “that I might receive a portion amongst the number of martyrs in the cup of [Thy] Christ unto resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit.”¹²⁸ No early Christian looked toward their next life without this in mind, clearly putting the idea of ascetic martyrdom to rest.

But what happened to the body which remained behind mutilated by the tortures enacted upon it by whip, sword, fire, or wild animal? In the Roman world, once the person died, the body held no interest to the spectators. This person had been a criminal,

¹²⁴ William Farina, *Perpetua of Carthage: Portrait of a Third Century Martyr*, 57.

¹²⁵ Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 52.

¹²⁶ Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 90.

¹²⁷ See for example, 2 Clement in *After the New Testament: A reader in Early Christianity*. 365-366.

¹²⁸ Staniforth, “Martyrdom of Polycarp” in *Early Christian Writings*.

and people went to watch them for sport, only caring about the actions leading to death. The spectators wanted nothing to do with what little remained of the condemned after he or she had perished. For the Proto-Orthodox, on the other hand, the death of a martyr in the arena did not signal the end of the interest in that person. These men and women in the eyes of the faithful were not criminals but heroes, and deserved to be treated as such. Thus, early Christians, beginning with the death of Stephen, began to collect the bones of martyrs. Frequently and especially early on, the Proto-Orthodox simply wished to honor those who had bravely died with a proper burial. The respect for the remnants of the dead, however, quickly passed beyond what Romans considered to be proper. As previously stated, Romans disliked the dead, seeking to rid themselves of corpses as soon as possible. They limited their contact with the deceased and even carefully buried them “outside the city away from the living” believing that “death brought the risk of pollution into the family.”¹²⁹

The Christian treatment of bones surpassed that of the Romans and even that of their Jewish ancestors, as it came to involve the “digging up, the moving, the dismemberment -- quite apart from much avid touching and kissing -- of the bones of the dead, and, frequently, the placing of these in areas from which the dead had once been excluded”.¹³⁰ While many historians, including Brown himself, recognize that Christians treated the dead in a unique fashion, this distances the reader too much from the physicality of the act. The dead are bones and the bones are bodies. While this may seem self-evident, the respect and love for the dead, and the revolutionary way this was expressed, equal love and respect for the body. For the Proto-Orthodox the body itself

¹²⁹ Salisbury, Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequence of Ancient Violence, 32.

¹³⁰ Brown, The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity, 4.

was holy.

The narrators of martyrs' deaths in the first three centuries AD frequently emphasized that the martyrs themselves were chosen by God, and that God resided in their *bodies* during their deaths. "The faithful [Christians]" Salisbury writes, "who watched the brave resilience of the martyrs knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God had given the martyrs body strength to withstand their ordeal," and subsequently that "people believed the flesh [of the martyrs] retained the power God had given it."¹³¹ God himself made these bodies holy, and that power did not leave when the soul left the body; instead, the power remained imbued within the bones themselves. Ignatius even recognized ante-mortem that his remains would be sanctified. Writing to the Magnesians, he commanded them to "leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am his wheat ground fine by the lion's teeth to be made purest bread for Christ. Better still, incite the creatures to become a sepulcher for me...."¹³² While the lion did not manage to consume Ignatius entirely, his bones still received the treatment he desired. His faithful followers collected the harder portions of his "holy remains," wrapped them in linen, and transported them to Antioch as an "inestimable treasure left to the holy church by the grace which was in the martyr."¹³³ Similarly, the Proto-Orthodox collected the charred remains of Polycarp, which they described as "more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold" and laid them in a suitable place.¹³⁴ The bones themselves were holy, even though the soul no longer resided in the body. The remnants were not disgusting scraps of dead flesh, but

¹³¹ Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence*, 50.

¹³² Ignatius, "Letter to the Magnesians" in *Early Christian Writings*, 80.

¹³³ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson trans., "The Martyrdom of Ignatius" in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1.

¹³⁴ Staniforth, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" in *Early Christian Writings*.

powerful objects chosen and blessed by God.

Stemming from this belief, the Proto-Orthodox treated the fragments which they did manage to obtain with great love and reverence. Not only did the objects become holy through their trial, but they also contained the power left in them by God. As time passed and many more Christians died for their faith, the Proto-Orthodox began to believe that the holy remnants could perform miracles.¹³⁵ Just as Jesus and his apostles in the Canonical gospels healed men and women by physically touching them, so too did bodies of the martyrs.¹³⁶ The flesh cured flesh and body cured body. God had deemed bodies, holy, powerful, and miraculous objects and the Proto-Orthodox firmly maintained this belief.

The Romans, because of their distaste for the dead, disliked the Christian collection of bones and actively tried to bar this from occurring. The Romans who sentenced Polycarp to death did not want followers to lay their hands on the entire corpse, and so they burned his already dead body, “falsely believing that if they turned the body over to the Christians, they would worship it like Christ”.¹³⁷ While this is not entirely true, since a purposefully biased Christian authored this document, at the very least it shows that even the Romans recognized that the body held great value to the Christians, and thus they went to great lengths to keep it from them. In some cases, the Romans even managed to destroy the body completely. The executioners of the martyrs of Lyons, for example, swept the ashes of the bodies into the Rhone, making sure not to leave a solitary scrap from the Christians to collect. For, unlike the Christian religion in which a

¹³⁵ Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2004), 86.

¹³⁶ Joyce E. Salisbury in her book *The Blood of Martyrs* confirms this reading. “Martyrs may not have claimed the ability to perform magic, but they, like other Christians, believed the Bible promised that even tokens that had touched holy bodies could perform miracles.” 59

¹³⁷ Saniforth, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp” ch. 17 in *Early Christian Writings*.

person would be reborn as long as he or she had lived and died in the name of God, according to the Roman religion, to deprive a body of proper burial was to deprive it of any form of afterlife. The author of the *Martyrs of Lyons*, however, mocks the Romans for this deed and what he calls their attempt to “deprive [the martyrs] of their second birth” because even the martyrs, who were torn to shreds, would be resurrected again in Christ.¹³⁸ Tertullian also strongly defends this belief and God’s unparalleled powers. “For if God produced all things whatever out of nothing,” Tertullian writes, “He will be able to draw forth from nothing even that which had fallen into nothing”.¹³⁹ God certainly would not allow his faithful to suffer eternal punishment on account of the enemy’s wickedness or the lack of visible remains. To say so would be to deny the power of the almighty God.

Yet, at the end of the second century, some debate still existed, even among Proto-Orthodox communities, as to the fate of the decomposed, ingested, or scattered pieces of a corpse. In his treatise “Concerning the Resurrection of the Dead,” Athenagoras attacks what he calls the “godless disbelief” and “impious blasphemy” of many early Christian communities which questioned the bodily resurrection.¹⁴⁰ Only two reasons exist, Athenagoras argues, why these men and women insist that God would not knit together and, in fact, completely restore the body: either they find this resurrection impossible for, or unworthy of, God. Athenagoras begins by addressing God’s supposed inability to restore bodies, for, as he says, since God created human beings, it is impossible for him not to know of what they are made, and therefore where every part

¹³⁸ Eusebius, “The Persecution and Martyrdoms of Lyons” ch. 10

¹³⁹ Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence*, 49

¹⁴⁰ Athenagoras, “De Resurrectione” 2:3 in *Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione*, trans., William R. Schoedel. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972)

has gone. Also, the fact that God was able to create bodies in the first place clearly speaks to his ability to complete the less difficult task of resurrecting bodies themselves.

Even more importantly, some of the Proto-Orthodox began to wonder how God could reunite fragments of flesh consumed by animals. As Bynum wisely recognizes, however, it is really not a problem of being nibbled by worms or devoured by beasts, but is instead a problem of digestion and cannibalism.¹⁴¹ Men and women of the second century frequently expressed their fears over what would happen if a body was consumed by an animal which was then eaten by a person, for, as they believed, the their own flesh would absorb any food which they ingested.¹⁴² Stemming from this belief, these men and women claimed that resurrection was an impossibility because “the same part cannot rise again in both sets of individuals.”¹⁴³ Athenagoras, however, scoffs at even this argument, claiming that those who succumbed to such flights of fancy were ignorant of the power and wisdom of God.¹⁴⁴ He then proceeds, in a Galenic fashion, to assert that the “body can be broken and reassembled precisely because it does *not*, through biological mechanisms, absorb into anything else.”¹⁴⁵ Flesh, in other words, cannot absorb flesh, and it therefore merely passes through the body without affecting it at all.

After clearly demonstrating God’s ability to resurrect the flesh no matter its location or condition, Athenagoras proceeds to prove that God is also *unwilling* to do so. Since God had already complete the lesser work of making a corruptible body, Athenagoras asks, why would the greater work of making an incorruptible and

¹⁴¹ Bynum, The Resurrection of the Body, 33.

¹⁴² Athenagoras, “De Resurrectione” 3:4, in Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione.

¹⁴³ Athenagoras, “De Resurrectione” 3:4 in Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione

¹⁴⁴ Athenagoras, “De Resurrectione” 5:1 in Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione

¹⁴⁵ Bynum, The Resurrection of the Body, 32.

impassable body be unworthy of him?¹⁴⁶ For God loved the body, and “made man for his own sake, and out of the goodness and wisdom which is reflected throughout creation.”¹⁴⁷ Thus, Athenagoras concludes, the resurrection of the body is “possible for the Creator, willed by him, and worthy of him.”¹⁴⁸ While people within the Proto-Orthodox communities themselves clearly struggled to logically understand physical reincarnation, their eventual adaptation of Athenagoras’ treaty clearly shows their acceptance of his doctrine. If bodies were loved by God and deemed worthy by Him, then so too did these people value their bodies given to them by God.

Bodies thus not only witness, but bore witness to, the love and power of God. Through their deaths, martyrs themselves became closer to Christ, as they imitated his passion and believed that he resided with them during their ordeal. These people also literally became witnesses, as God acted in them, taking away their pain, and imbuing their flesh with holy power after their deaths. The martyrs and the belief system that eventually surrounded them clearly reveal the love both the Proto-Orthodox and their God held for their physical bodies.

¹⁴⁶ Athenagoras, “De Resurrectione” 10:6 in Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione

¹⁴⁷ Athenagoras, “De Resurrectione” 12:6 in Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione

¹⁴⁸ Athenagoras, “De Resurrectione” 10:1, in Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione

Conclusion

As Tertullian rightly observed, Christianity bestowed a new dignity upon the flesh.¹⁴⁹ The Proto-Orthodox did not understand themselves dualistically as souls working to control the body, but instead psychophysically, insisting that their body and soul constituted two equally important aspects of themselves. Armed with this new conceptualization of Proto-Orthodox selfhood, historians have begun to recognize the love and respect these men and women held for their physical bodies. This reevaluation of the attitude of the Proto-Orthodox towards physical bodies turns on the careful consideration of three pivotal aspects of the writings, the beliefs, and the practices of the Proto-Orthodox.

First, the writings canonized by the Proto-Orthodox consistently affirm Jesus' love for and care of people's physical bodies. The Evangelists, for example, relate how Jesus fed thousands of people simply because they were hungry and he was concerned for their physical well-being. Jesus and his disciples frequently overturned the Jewish Law not only to declare all foods clean, but to feed both themselves and others when they hungered. They also cured and healed hundreds of men and women abandoned or outcast by their communities because of their debilitating diseases. The gender, social status, or even religious affiliation of these people did not concern the Proto-Orthodox at all; they only desired that a healthy body should be restored to them.

Second, the Proto-Orthodox celebrated physical birth and rebirth. They affirmed the physical incarnation and rebirth of their messiah, and the anticipated rebirth of the messiah's followers, as crucial tenants of their religion. Not only did they celebrate their

¹⁴⁹ Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs*, 48.

own births into this world, counting birth as a blessing beyond all others, but also professed that Christ was also physically born of Mary. Indeed, they understood that Jesus was born not just once, but twice: three days after his death Jesus was reincarnated in his earthly body to reveal to all that he had conquered death by being born again. The Proto-Orthodox believed that they, like Jesus, would be physically resurrected on Judgment Day. While some dispute arose over this in the second century, the doctrine eventually became well-established, as the Proto-Orthodox uniformly looked forward to the day when their bodies would be raised alongside their souls to be united in full personhood forever. While this flesh was now clothed in immortality, it remained entirely human to be cherished by these men and women for ever more.

Third, the Proto-Orthodox recognized bodies, particularly those of the martyrs, as the dwelling places of God. As martyrdom swept across the ancient world and hundreds of men and women were sentenced to death, the Proto-Orthodox began to preach that Christ resided within the bodies of these men and women, taking away their pain while still allowing their flesh to bear witness to Christ's passion and glory. After the martyrs' deaths, the early Christians who collected the martyr's remains insisted that God's power lingered in these bones and subsequently that the mutilated scraps were relics imbued with the ability to heal.

Thus, in every stage of a person's life, the Proto-Orthodox treated the body as an object of love and respect, even a holy object blessed by the Lord. Far from disdaining the flesh, the Proto-Orthodox loved it, even when other religions felt nothing but disgust. To these men and women the body constituted half of who they were and an essential aspect of their personhood.

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